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BY THE AUTHOR OF "FOUND DEAD."

IN ONE VOLUME.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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A NOVEL.

BY THE

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CECIL'S TRYST.

CHAPTER I.

Gatcombe.

If you know the south country, you must needs have heard of the Wrays of Gatcombe. They represented Sandylandshire for three successive parliaments, and ruined themselves in endeavouring to do so in the fourth, in the teeth of Fate and the Reform Bill. It used to be a boast of the race that none of them had ever accepted subordinate political office—and no high one was ever offered to them, for they had not good brains—nor a title from a minister. They would have been peers if they could, perhaps; but to have been Sir Frederick Wray, Bart., would have been to be the last of a third-rate order; while to be Fred. Wray of Gatcombe, was to be the first of Sandylandshire notables. The head of the house was always a Frederick, and the name was abbreviated by the country-folk for love—if the affectionate regards of a constituency can be so entitled. When the Wrays lost their seat and their "position," they began to be intellectual. The first who inaugurated this regime was my father.

His younger brother, Thomas, was also a clever fellow in a very different line. He was a soldier of fortune; which, in those days, meant a soldier who had the art of acquiring other people's fortunes—mostly those of the

natives of India. He quitted home, to open the Hindustan oyster with his sword, before I came into the world, and never saw the white cliffs of England again: so Uncle Tom and I never met. As a memory, however, he had more substantiality in my eyes than many whom I have been acquainted with in the flesh. When I was a boy of ten, his doings had not died out of mind in the county yet, and the recital of them interested me amazingly. His feats at election-time—the election that had ruined us all—had, in particular, quite a magical attraction for me. If pluck, and straight hitting from the shoulder, could have won my father his seat, the partisan-ship of Uncle Tom would have secured it for him; he drove about with the gold in bags, and sowed it broadcast; he spoke, in public, such words against our adversary as (at that time) invited pistol-shots, and they were welcome to him; he "neutralised" five-and-twenty adverse votes by standing throughout the poll-day at the head of the cellar-stairs at the Red Lion, at Lipton, with a shutter-bar in his hand, and daring the imprisoned "free and independent" to "come on." When a "dead lift" was necessary, our agent said that there was no man that could be so thoroughly depended upon as Mr. Tom. My grandmother had Irish blood in her veins, which, it was said, accounted for it. But notwithstanding this charitable view of his character—which was, after all, only taken by our own side, the losing one—and the warm affection that existed between the brothers, I think it was rather a relief to my father when Tom went to expend his superfluous energies in India. It was whispered that there was some difficulty in getting him off; not that he didn't wish to go, but that he was "wanted" by the police in respect to some frivolous and vexatious charge, to answer which might, nevertheless,

have delayed him for some years. Indeed, it was to avoid this troublesome matter that he never came home again.

After our political fiasco, my father retired into private life, which, indeed, the crippled state of his finances would have compelled him to do at any rate; but the fact was, he was by nature inclined for study and seclusion. He had few sympathies in common with those of the county families about him. He was no sportsman; would never even have preserved his game, had it not been for my uncle's sake, in whose eyes a pheasant was, what few other objects were, a sacred thing; and when he did ride, he rode cobs. At the time I speak of, there was but one even of those humble animals in the great stables at Gatcombe, formerly so well filled with champing steeds; though, afterwards (as you shall hear), we did increase our stud a little. The home establishment, generally, was upon a very limited scale, considering the size of the house itself, which was very great. Under its roof the Wrays had lived and died for centuries, and my father clung to it in his fallen fortunes: otherwise I don't think he cared very much about being called Fred. Wray of Gatcombe, nor, indeed, for fame at all, though it were of a much less questionable sort. If he prided himself on anything, it was on his philosophy. He was a scholar of a very rare kind; not in Greek or Latin—though he was not ignorant of those languages—but in old English literature, chiefly of the Elizabethan era. The drama of that period was his especial delight. He knew all Shakespeare, I verily believe, by heart; but his favourite quotations were from the contemporaries of our great National Poet, such as Greene and Marlowe, Dekker and Webster, the application of whose lines to modern circumstances sounded in unlearned ears absurdly enough, and some-

what weirdly also. The first recollections I have of my father—with his pointed Vandyck beard, and in the long red dressing-gown which was his usual wear till mid-day, sonorously reciting from the old playwrights—are those of a kindly magician. No poet ever imagined a kindlier soul, though it was his humour to hide his tenderness behind a thin veil of banter. One practice, in particular, he adopted from one of his favourite authors, namely, the addressing of those he loved best by the most unloving titles; thus, I have heard him call Aunt Ben "Sycorax;" and even, on one occasion, when he wished to be specially affectionate, "Thou Stygian Witch," which sounded very surprisingly to a stranger. Aunt Ben was my maiden aunt, Miss Benita Wray, who presided over the household, and had done so ever since my mother's death, which happened in my infancy. She had the utmost respect for my father, and understood him thoroughly, though without attempting to enter into his pursuits. Her literature, indeed, was confined to the titles of the jam-pots in the preserve cupboard, with one remarkable exception. She was so assiduous a student of the Bible, and gifted with so marvellous a memory, that she could give chapter and verse for every text. In this accomplishment of Aunt Ben's my father took especial pride, and was for ever endeavouring to confound her.

Gatcombe Manor—for the house still went by its old name, though the manor had passed into other hands than ours—was a huge rectangular building, of no particular style, the design of which (if its architect had ever had any) seemed to have been to enclose a space in its centre, called "the Court," into which half the bedroom windows looked, to the great depression of their tenants' spirits. It was paved, and had a draw-well in it, which my infant mind associated with the wicked doings of little

Bobby Greene. "Did you *know* Bobby Greene, papa," I once inquired, "who drowned the poor cat?"

"I knew him well," answered my father gravely.

"Was it a tortoise-shell," said I pathetically, "like ours?"

> "It was buxom, and blithe, and young, I ween,
> Beauteous like a summer's queen;
> For her sides were ruddy hued,
> As if lilies were imbrued
> With drops of blood, to make the white
> Please the eye with more delight."

Then, to stop the tears set flowing by this tender picture, he added—still felicitously quoting from even an older Bobby Greene than mine:

> "Weep not, my wanton; smile upon my knee;
> When thou art old, there's grief enough for thee."

And thus, from my earliest years, was I regaled with tags and snatches of old verse, till they grew as familiar as nursery rhymes.

My father had a rooted antipathy to all schools, derived, I fancy, from some unpleasant personal experience of them, and educated me himself at home. When any remonstrance was made with him on this account—which was but seldom, for there were few who had the right to interfere in such a matter, and fewer still who cared to "tackle" him upon any subject on which he was known to have a prejudice—he had this cut-and-dry reply: "If my boy lives, he will know more that is worth knowing than your prize school-prig; and if he dies, he will at least have had a happy boyhood." The latter part of this statement I can honestly corroborate. I had a pony of my own, plenty of pocket-money, and a leaping-pole, the charms of which last are, I notice, almost unknown to the boys of to-day. At twelve, though a tall boy, I could clear my own height with ease; while as for breadth,

there was scarce a brook in the county that I could not fly over like a bird. The pole, strong, supple, and light, was at least ten feet long; and with its help, I could go across country, taking a far straighter line as to fences than the best hunter that my ancestors had ever crossed. Many a time, from the steep bank of some Sandylandshire lane, have I cleared a returning team with their astonished guardian; flocks of sheep; and even on one occasion a herd of oxen. The buoyant spring, the hurtling through the air, the thud of my young feet upon the opposite bank, recur to me as I write, and stir the sluggish blood within me even now. Independently of this accomplishment, the country round had its peculiar charms for a wholesome-minded lad, which, thanks to my father, I think I was. Behind and above the house, though it was built on high ground, stretched an immense tableland of wind-swept heath, the soil of which was finest sand. This was a paradise for rabbits. Moreover, there were a thousand caverns, for the whole place was honeycombed for the sake of the scythe-stones which it yielded. For generations it had thus been undermined, and the work was going on still. One result of this was to form from the excavations a magnificent terrace, miles and miles in length, the view from which extended over half-a-dozen counties, and even, at some points, to the ocean. The eyes of Columbus could hardly have feasted upon the Land of the West with greater delight than mine did upon that fringe of sea, to which in those days I never approached nearer. The sighing of the fir-trees, that grew in great profusion on the sand-cliff, did duty more efficiently than I was aware of for the unheard murmur of the waves. I can hear them now, and smell their sweet pungent breath, which the wise men of to-day aver to be a specific against consumption. It was not so,

however, in my time, for consumption was the scourge of Gatcombe. Not that the village was itself unhealthy, but that almost the whole population, men, women, and children, worked in the scythe-stone caverns, and thereby destroyed themselves.

It was impossible to persuade them to do otherwise, because the gains of that employment were so much greater than what could be earned in agricultural labour. All day long, through summer and winter, the stroke of the spade and the click of the hammer mingled with the murmur of the firs, that shook their funereal heads above this scene, as though in sorrowful protest. Scores of men were at work, each in his own burrow—the right to dig in which for his private behoof he purchased—like bees in the cells of some huge comb; and the women and children helped, by wheeling out the sand in barrows, and emptying them on the terrace. Their husbands and fathers, working in an unventilated space, where there was scarcely room to turn, were in a manner digging their own tombs. At home, it was the women's task to shape the stone thus obtained into the form of that with which "the mower whets his scythe;" and they, too, were working for the mower Death, for the thin particles of dust that escaped during the process into the lungs were sooner or later fatal to them. Thus it happened that there was scarcely an old man or an old woman in all the village.

By a boy, however, such social calamities are ill understood, if understood at all. There was, in fact, to my mind something attractive in our people, and which contrasted very favourably with the looks of other villagers; and it was long before I came to know that the bright eyes and high-coloured cheeks about us meant disease, and the absence of old people the king of terrors.

Moreover, there was no want at Gatcombe, for the work, such as it was, was plentiful, and well paid; while melancholy was a thing unknown (at least as a public spectacle), for the motto of the toilers was, "A short life and a merry one," and their cares they drowned in cider.

My father and Aunt Ben did what they could to amend this state of things; in particular, certain masks were purchased for the women to wear during their hurtful toil; and if little good was effected (the children used to play at highwaymen, I remember, in the masks), their endeavours were appreciated, even by those who declined to take advantage of them. After all, I have forgotten to mention the chief peril of the sand-cliff, and which invested it in my boyish eyes with a ghastly interest. There was scarcely one of these narrow caves but had its catastrophe. A man could not pay the sum, small as it was, that was necessary to buy fir-poles for the support of his cell walls; or (which was more common) he would dispose of them for drink; whence it sooner or later happened that some stroke of his pickaxe brought down a fall of sand on his devoted head, or, worse, brought it down behind him, so as to set an impassable barrier between himself and the world without. It was then of small avail, even though another were working near him, to give the alarm; for tons upon tons of sand were often brought down, through which the would-be rescuers had to dig, propping and roofing their way at every step, lest they also should share the fate of the victim. The disaster was so common, that everything was done at once—though almost always in vain—to avert the catastrophe. A messenger was dispatched on horseback for a surgeon; and in the mean time my father was summoned, who, with Aunt Ben, would hurry to the spot with blankets, brandy, and a lancet. It was

long before I was permitted to be a witness of such a scene; but I knew a score of places where the tragedy had occurred, and had its details at my finger-ends. Sometimes a family would still work on in a cave that had actually been the living tomb of their progenitor, and even neglect those very precautions, the lack of which had proved fatal to him: such contempt can familiarity breed of even death itself. Not a ghost haunted the hill. The fate of those who perished there was held as natural as that which carried others to the churchyard by a more tedious route; just as soldiers on service regard death upon the battle-field as no more strange than in the hospital ward.

The wholesome air of high-placed Gatcombe discouraged all morbid ideas; on the hottest July day there was always a breeze upon the heath, a gentle swaying of the pine-tops. The woods themselves were dowered with an eternal beauty. In winter, they did not lose their green; in summer, the layers of shade above kept off the heat, while beneath, at each tree-foot, was spread a carpet of moss, in which one's limbs sank till they were hid. What bliss to lie on such, and watch through the green roof the clouds sail slowly by, or, twixt the straight red stems, that fair expanse of hill and plain, the apple-orchards, the low white farms, the streams and copses, and, in the western verge, the tall gray towers of Monkton, the cathedral town! They were too far to make their iron tongue be heard; the wood-pigeons' coo overhead alone broke the summer silence. That happy time went by unnoted, the hours of which recur with such sombre clang to-day—the knell of the unburied Past. O youth, youth, youth! if ever thou comest back to us again, then indeed there is a Heaven!

In may early days, I had no playmate save the vil-

lage boys, and many a rough game and rougher combat did I have with them. There was one amusement that was an especial favourite. The sand-cliff sloped on all sides, affording the softest falling; and to run and leap out into the air as far as possible, and to fall and fall, was a glorious pastime. To the stranger, such experiments appeared suicidal—a leap from the Tarpeian rock; but they were free from danger, unless one disinhumed oneself from one's sand-grave too tardily, and the next cleaver of the air fell, Icarus-like, upon one's head and shoulders. Before this sport all others paled; it was sublime—epic.

If I had no boy-companion, I had a friend of the gentler sex in Eleanor Bourne, the vicar's daughter. She was called the Gipsy, from her dark complexion, but might have been termed so almost as fitly from the out-of-door life she led. I, too, loved "to hear the lark sing rather than the mouse squeak," and grudged every moment of sunshine that found me within walls; but I had my father's teaching to attend to, whereas Nelly pursued even her studies in the epen air. How often have I found her—not by accident—sitting at a pine-foot, with her black hair, through which she would nevertheless contrive to spy me coming, falling over the pages of *Télémaque*, and with a whole library of educational works beside her, which were moved to make room for me. Like me, she was motherless; but there all similarity in our circumstances ceased. Her father was a conventional parson; had taken moderate honours at the university; was grave and dull; and fancied, because he was pompous, that he was impressive. It seemed to me that he had somehow missed being a gentleman; but perhaps that was prejudice on my part. His father, who was still alive, and lived at the vicarage, had purchased much of

the land with which the Wrays had had to part; and the mind of a boy is prone to resent what a man's judgment acquiesces in. But as for Mr. Bourne the elder, he had missed being a gentleman by a mile—one of those mushroom men, of whom it has been so happily said, that their being "self-made" relieves the Creator from a very grave responsibility. How thoroughly would my father, with his deep sense of humour, have appreciated that remark; but in those days American satire had not shot its sharp beams across the sea.

Nelly and I were fast friends and constant companions —lovers, if you will, though the love was of a very innocent sort, and unsuspected even by ourselves. We read together; talked and thought over many a rich volume borrowed from my father's shelves; and I suppose, considering our Platonic passion, and the nature of our studies, we may have been set down as "blue." We knew not of the term, however, except as the colour of the sky, that ever roofed those youthful days. Undimmed by cloud, unvexed by storm, it stretched above us, until an event occurred which was fated to bring me face to face with the world, and to make the past appear a page from some *Life in Dreamland.* Perhaps I have already dwelt on it too long; as one who, leaning o'er her harp, dwells on some tune, of which her hearers tire, but which in *her* ears discourses sweetest melody, because it wakes the thought of bygone days.

CHAPTER II.

Unexpected Guests.

THE letters used to arrive at Gatcombe about breakfast-time; and the "Manor bag," as the postman called it, was generally brought in during the discussion of that

meal, and opened by my father, not quite so promptly as Aunt Ben desired. Women never tire of receiving letters; whereas men, after middle life, for the most part abhor them. *They* do not write for the sake of interchanging gossip, "keeping up" old friendship, or with "effusion" of any kind. Business and bills form the staple of their correspondence; and though the day of bills—and it had been a bitter one—was past in my father's case, business always troubled him; that is, the mere details of it, though he had plenty of sagacity, and was practical enough whenever he gave himself the trouble to be so. He had a contempt and dislike for the management of affairs, which those who did not know him might easily have mistaken for affectation. "A good man of business," he would aver, was a man who was good for nothing else; and "common sense was exactly what the term implied—no more, no less—the average sagacity, not to possess which was to be beneath the ordinary intellectual standard." Conventional opinions to the contrary, embodied in such expressions as, "He has every sense but common sense," and applied to men of genius, irritated him exceedingly. "The meaning these idiots intend to convey, I suppose, is, that men of genius are blind to their own advantage; whereas the fact is that they do not find their advantage where the dolts do, otherwise they would attain the same objects with far greater ease." Perhaps my father had been twitted with this supposed deficiency himself. He certainly did not like the Manor bag, and opened it upon this particular occasion with the usual tardiness and careless contempt. The expression of his face altered a little, however, as he drew forth an Indian letter, and turned it over unopened in his hand.

"A letter from Tom!" cried my aunt. "Well, I'm

sure it's about time he wrote: we have not heard from him for years."

"It's not from Tom," said my father gravely.

"I trust nothing has gone wrong with him?" continued Aunt Ben with agitation.

"I trust not," was my father's answer. There was a grim solemnity in his tone, which I knew augured the worst. "Go to the study, my boy," said he, laying his hand affectionately on my head; "I have a few words for your aunt's private ear."

When my father entered his sanctum, half an hour afterwards, he wore a black coat in place of his red dressing-gown; from which I gathered at once that my Uncle Tom was dead; which was the case.

"You have lost an uncle, my boy, whom you have never seen; but I an only brother, who was at one time all in all to me. True, that was long ago: circumstances occurred to estrange us, even before he left England, and we have not met these thirty years; but—"

There was a portrait of my uncle in the study, painted when he was a very young man: it showed a face of great beauty and fire, but without the tenderness which was the charm of his brother's less handsome features. My father's eye here lit on this; he stopped midway in his speech, and rising, approached the picture with reverent looks. "Dear Tom," said he, with inexpressible pathos, "good-bye; your last wishes shall be obeyed, just as though I had been beside your deathbed and heard them." He sighed, returned to his chair, and then addressed me in tones that were serious, but no longer sad.

"The best tribute one can pay to the memory of the dead, my dear boy, is to respect their injunctions: all the trappings and suits of woe are not worth a dump.

The next best thing is to discard all thoughts of them that are to their discredit." (I felt that the colour was rising in my cheeks; for the news I had just heard had, I confess, set me thinking of the wild doings and misdoings of my late relative.) "I don't know," resumed my father, after a pause, "whether foolish people have ever led you to believe that your Uncle Tom's death would materially benefit us; but if so, they were mistaken. He has left two legitimate children, of about your own age."

"Two children!" exclaimed I with astonishment too great for chagrin (and indeed the idea of being my uncle's heir had never taken any hold upon my mind, though it had certainly been suggested to it by others). "I did not know that he had been ever married."

"Nor I, until to-day," said my father quietly. "But the fact is so, nevertheless. You have two cousins—twin boy and girl—whose acquaintance you will shortly make, for they are on their road hither already. They will live here, under this roof, until they come of age."

Upon the whole, I was pleased to hear this news. I had long been too old for the society of the village boys: not pride, but the sense of incongruity, had put an end to such familiarity. We had nothing in common; and the idea of having a companion of my own age, and perhaps tastes, was very welcome. The subject, however, was not pursued by my father, with whom I at once commenced my studies as usual; but later in the day, I found Aunt Benita much more communicative. Uncle Tom, it seemed, had married soon after he reached India; but, for some reason or other, had concealed the fact from my father during all these years. He had probably, said my aunt, married greatly beneath him. The wife had long been dead, and yet neither of her decease nor

existence had he written one line: that is, not by way of letter; but he had always carried about with him a certain document, addressed to my father, to be forwarded in case of his own death; and at last this had come to hand. Therein his two children were affectionately intrusted to his brother's care until they should attain the age of twenty-one, when the son (Cecil) was to come into his property, a very considerable fortune; and the daughter (Jane) would inherit four thousand pounds. If Cecil died childless, his fortune was to revert to myself (in order, said the document, that the house of Wray should be duly represented); but if Jane should die unmarried before him, her fortune was to go to her brother. Such, roughly stated, were the conditions of the will; in the mean time five hundred pounds a year was to be paid to my father for the maintenance of the orphans. Copies of the will, of my uncle's marriage certificate, and of the registration of the twin children's birth, were enclosed, and the London lawyer indicated to whose safe keeping the originals had been consigned. The children—if they could be called such, for they were nearly eighteen—were already on their way, as a letter informed us, written by a brother-officer of my uncle's, and announcing his decease. They might arrive, as Aunt Ben said, "any day;" and she instantly set about her arrangements for their reception.

She seemed to me more shocked at my uncle's death than sorry for it, and I think she was deeply chagrined on my account to hear of the existence of these undreamed-of relatives. We had all known that Uncle Tom was rich: every year a box of magnificent presents had arrived from India; shawls for my aunt, not one of which she had ever ventured to wear (where *could* she have worn such shawls except at church? and what chance

would the discourses of the Rev. Mr. Bourne have had against their attraction, if she had?); precious manuscripts for my father, exquisitely illustrated, but, of course, wholly undecipherable; and inlaid yataghans, and bows and arrows, for myself. These wonderful gifts, typical in their uselessness and splendour, of our empire in the East, were now, it seemed, all that we should ever derive in the way of advantage from Uncle Tom's prosperity. To do Aunt Ben justice, she had no regrets upon her own account; but I fancy she had entertained hopes that her eccentric brother would one day return, and make amends for his wayward youth by rebuilding the fallen fortunes of our house. "At all events, I do think, my dear, that he might have left your father some special bequest, in consideration of—But there, how should *you know?*"

In after years I came to the knowledge of certain pecuniary sacrifices which had been made upon my uncle's account by his brother, to which I have no doubt this remark of my aunt had reference. But my father never once alluded to the matter, nor, as I believe, ever gave it a passing thought. The memory of his dead brother was sacred with him. I shall never forget the tone of sublime conviction in which, when Aunt Ben hazarded the observation, "I suppose there can be no doubt of the genuineness of those documents which are said to be in that London lawyer's hands?" he replied, "My dear, Uncle Tom has said so."

There was no lack of accommodation at the Manor-house, so far as room was concerned, for half-a-dozen pair of twin cousins; but it was evident that the arrival of my new-found relatives was to make a change in our way of living. There were many "sympathising" callers as soon as the record of Uncle Tom's decease appeared

in the papers, and my father made a point of returning each visit in person. "You and I, Fred, gentle shepherds as we are, might shut ourselves up as we pleased," he would say, smiling; "but it is only right that your cousins should see the world, and it is my place to introduce them to it."

Most of the good folks our neighbours were pleased at our being about to have these visitors; since the fact had already "brought my father out," as they termed it, as though he had been a *débutant;* for though a recluse in his habits, he made himself very agreeable when society was forced upon him: moreover, the event gave them something to talk about, which was a desideratum in Sandylandshire, as in one or two other country neighbourhoods with which I afterwards became acquainted. Mr. Bourne the elder, familiarly entitled by my father, after Ben Jonson, "the Alchemist" (he had found the philosopher's stone in the sandcliff in the shape of a scythe-stone), was in particular greatly elated by the news. His imagination, which, if not powerful, did not waste itself in mere luxuriant fancies, but was concentrated on the one idea of money-making, pictured my cousins as an Indian prince and princess, and his heart went forth to welcome them accordingly. "The idea, sir" (he used to call me "sir" from the age of ten)—"the idea of your Uncle Thomas having made all that money: the last man in the world, one would have said, to have done it; but it does happen so sometimes—sometimes." And then he shook his hoary head, and pressed his skinny lips, as though he would have added, "But not twice in the same family, sir; mark that—*you* will never make a shilling." Perhaps he deemed it possible that my cousins would wish to buy back the family estate, sand-cliff and all, and already scented a good stroke of business; or

perhaps it was from mere greedful curiosity that the old man once ventured to inquire of my father whether these young people were so immensely rich as was rumoured.

"*They are Peru, sir,*" was the reply; "*great Solomon's Ophir.*"

"Gad, then," said he, looking round on the somewhat dim and faded furniture of our room of state, "you'll be put to it to entertain them fitly.—I mean," added he quickly, made sensible by a flash from my father's eyes that his remark had not been the pink of courtesy, "that you will have to spend a good deal of money in their reception."

"You are right, my friend," answered my father; "'tis fit we change

> 'All that is metal in this house to gold;
> And early in the morning will I send
> To all the plumbers and the pewterers,
> To take their tin and lead up.'

Rich! you say?

> 'T' Hesperian Garden, Cadmus' story,
> Jove's Shower, the Boon of Midas, Argus' eyes,
> Boccace his Demogorgon, thousands more,
> Are abstract riddles of their wealth.' "

"Thousands?" exclaimed the old man, catching at the only word intelligible to him in this outburst. "Why, they must have tens of thousands, and jewels too, I dare-say!"

"Yes, indeed," was my father's grave response; "and, in particular, *the flower of the sun, the perfect ruby, which we call Elixir.*"

Out of this conversation a rumour went abroad that my cousins were bringing a sort of Koh-i-Noor with them, to be worn in the hat or the hair; so that the public curiosity to behold them was excited to the utmost. One pecuniary advantage old Mr. Bourne did glean out

of the event; for, hearing that my father had dropped some hint of engaging a private tutor for Cecil, he hastened down to the Manor House to volunteer his son's services in that capacity. My father, although surprised, was by no means displeased at this officious zeal. The idea of a resident tutor was not welcome; and, on the other hand, it would not have entered into his head to ask such a service of the pompous vicar; for though the tithes that fell to the share of that divine were small, he was, as the son of the alchemist, held of course as a most prosperous man. But old Bourne dispelled this illusion very quickly. "My son has nothing, sir, but what I choose to give him, except the living, and even that I bought for him—yes, sir, with my own hard-earned money. What interest have I ever yet got for the sums I spent upon his college education? Not a shilling, sir; not a shilling. Here is an opportunity for making it bear a little fruit, which I shall certainly not permit him to miss. Let him thole a bit, let him thole a bit, as I have done all my life."

The idea of thus disposing of the services of a beneficed clergyman, of fifty years of age, just as though he had been arranging for a lad's apprenticeship, did not strike the old gentleman as being in any way unbecoming; and my father had the greatest difficulty—though he carefully avoided quotations from the Elizabethan poets—in making him understand that such an offer must needs emanate from the vicar himself. In the end, however, it did so, though in a very different manner from that in which it had been made by proxy. The reverend gentleman was all carelessness and condescension—"He had been given to understand that Mr. Wray had sounded his father with respect to his (the vicar's) undertaking the education of young Mr. Cecil; well, it was true that he

had some classical and mathematical knowledge—perhaps as much as most people who call themselves scholars; but really, teaching was such drudgery; and yet on the other hand, he would do anything to oblige so respected a friend and neighbour." In the end, he concluded the bargain to so great an advantage that it would have done credit to the alchemist himself, and might have sufficed of itself (but for the existence of his daughter Eleanor) to have established the theory of the hereditary transmission of great qualities.

Nelly alone, of all our neighbours, regarded the coming of my cousins with disfavour. She foresaw in it an interruption to our common studies and companionship, and augured ill from it in all respects. "You will be fast friends with Cecil," said she, "and care for nothing but hunting and sporting" (the stud at the Manor had already been increased, and also the armory); "and your cousin Jane will be exquisitely beautiful, and you will fall in love with one another, as cousins always do, and care no more for your poor little Nelly."

I think this prophecy went far to mar its own fulfilment, at all events as far as its latter half was concerned; for the despair of the fair sibyl so moved me, that then and there I printed a kiss upon her cheek for the first time in my life (though there were a good many impressions taken afterwards), and swore an unalterable fidelity. Except Aunt Ben, which could scarcely be said to count as an experience of the operation, I had never kissed any one before; and the effect of that experiment was tremendous. I had already thought myself happy, but from henceforth I knew that I had been mistaken. The golden age of the world may have been the beginning of it, because man and woman were made grown up; but the golden age of life does not commence in childhood. The

songs of infancy are sweet, but there is no melody among them to be compared with that wordless music which the finger of first love evokes from the heart-strings.

Days and weeks passed by, more swiftly than I had ever known them to do so, and when our long-looked-for guests did come, I had almost forgotten that they were expected. Their arrival took place late in a July evening, just as our little household were preparing to retire to rest. The sound of wheels was heard far off in the avenue that led from the village. I saw Aunt Ben look up from her employment, which was darning stockings—for embroidery and fancy-work of all sorts, unless knitting can be so termed, she despised—and listen attentively.

"It is your cousins," she whispered, for my father was deep in Webster (not the Dictionary), and did not like to be interrupted in his reading. But he had also heard the noise, and quietly read out the passage:

"I pray thee, look thou giv'st the little boy some syrup for his cold; and let the girl say her prayers ere she sleep;"

then closed the book, and went to the hall-door to receive the new comers.

There were no less than three carriages, for their luggage was extensive, and in the first, of course, were our guests. The twins were as like as it is possible for two human beings to be, and exceedingly plain, though there was something about them (to be mentioned presently) far more extraordinary in my eyes than their plainness. When they had been duly welcomed, Aunt Ben ushered Jane to her apartment, while I did the like office for Cousin Cecil. He thanked me graciously, but in somewhat guttural tones, which were the very echo of his sister's; and I left him and returned to the drawing-

room, whither I found Aunt Ben had already repaired, and was talking alone with my father.

"Why, good gracious!" cried I, eloquent with pent-up wonder, "they are blackamoors!"

"Hush, for shame!" exclaimed my aunt. "They are nothing of the sort; and if they are, it is not their fault."

"But they *are*," said I.—"Are they not?" appealing to my father.

He nodded gravely.

"'Black as the bird that in the silent night
Doth shake contagion from her sable wings.'

The fact is—as perhaps we ought to have warned you, my boy—there is just a dash of the tar-brush in your cousins."

I had indeed greatly exaggerated the swarthiness of their complexions, which was partly owing to their birth, but also to the effects of the Indian sun. They were not black, but black and tan, like terriers; still their colour could scarcely have astonished me more had it been magenta.

CHAPTER III.

Across the Way.

NATURE, as I have said, had cast my twin cousins, with the exception of sex, in the same mould. They were as like as peas—dried peas, for their swarthiness had that withered and yellow look which so often belongs to the Asiatic. Their voices were so similar, that it was impossible for the ear alone to decide who spoke; and even their handwritings defied the eye to discern that of the brother from that of the sister. Their mutual affection was, moreover, such, that they loved one another as themselves, and this bond united them more closely than

the natural ligament that bound together the Siamese twins. And yet, curiously enough, we soon discovered that their dispositions were as opposite as the poles. Cecil's nature was impulsive, generous, and candid; that of his sister, secretive, proud, and unconciliatory. Even Aunt Ben, with whom (though she had her prejudices) no human being had ever yet contrived to quarrel, confessed that she could not "get on" with Cousin Jane. Kindness had no power to impress her, and of course only kindness was tried. At nineteen, she resembled one of those cast-iron spinsters of fifty, who regard even children with a stony stare, and reserve their affections for a cat or a dog, and when they die, leave all their money to forward distant missionary enterprise. It was touching to observe the efforts made by her brother to mitigate (for her own sake, for she was never harsh to *him*) the repulsive harshness of her manner, to bring warmth into her cold looks, and when all was to no purpose, to excuse her failings (as he tenderly imagined them) to others; her health had suffered, he said, from the change of climate; but we never knew her to ail.

Though the faces of my cousins were duplicates, the expression which their respective characters had evoked in each was very different. In Jane's case, plainness was so intensified by ill-humour, that she was downright ugly; in Cecil's, plainness was so mitigated by cheerfulness, that he was almost comely. The intelligence of both was very considerable; but here the advantage lay on the other side. Jane had taken every opportunity that India had afforded—and there had been no stint to Uncle Tom's provision for them in the way of education—to improve her mind; whereas the ignorance of Cecil was something stupendous. It is quite possible for even a clever boy to emerge from a great public school in Eng-

land, after half-a-dozen years' devotion to its so-called studies, with the merest smattering of Greek and Latin, and a total absence of information about any other subject whether of use or interest; but Cecil had gone through his Calcutta curriculum as a wild-duck dives through the water and comes up again—if not absolutely dry, yet scarcely damp. Nothing, really nothing, remained about him to evince that he had been to school at all, unless I may except a passion for private theatricals, an amusement to which, it seems, the schoolboys of India are (or were) much devoted. He had a good memory, was an excellent mimic, and had a passion for what children call "dressing-up," that in one of his years was rather ridiculous. His attachment to my father, with whom, as indeed, with all of us, he soon became a great favourite, led him to look into that Elizabethan treasure-house, in which the former so delighted; and though, doubtless, he missed what was best, he caught much of its humour, and reproduced it to admiration. I shall never forget him (all unconscious of plagiarism from Pistol), attired in full eastern costume, addressing our astonished cook in the sonorous words of Tamberlaine, and threatening the good soul with instant decapitation, as "a pampered jade of Asia." Singularly enough, considering his oriental extraction, he was far from slothful; very strong and active, and delighting in all out-door exercise. The use of a leaping-pole was, when he came to us, as unknown to him as the rest of the sciences; but, on the other hand, he took to it with avidity. My own high-flying expeditions had caused, as I have said, some little excitement in the neighbourhood; but that sank into insignificance compared with the wonder aroused by the feats of Cousin Cecil. Being in his novitiate, he was not, of course, so skilful a performer as myself; but his pluck

was marvellous, and his conceptions, so to speak—his ideas of what was practicable—sublime. More audacious than the philosopher who only required a standing-point in order to move the world, he made light of even that mechanical difficulty. From a hedge-top, from a quaking bog, from a slippery house-roof, he would hurl himself through space with ambitious aim, and the most supreme indifference to the result.

It was not to be wondered at that the astonished villagers who beheld this flying portent of swarthy hue, associated him in their minds with the Prince of the Power of the Air, and called him "our Gatcombe Devil." Somehow or other, his sister got to hear of this, and it annoyed her extremely: she expressed her opinion that all such contumelious persons should be taken up and whipped; and when we laughed at the idea of such wholesale punishment, she was offended. As a matter of fact, Cecil was popular with everybody; his frankness and freedom from pride made their way to all hearts; nor, doubtless, were the reckless feats, which won him so disrespectful a misname, without their charms. It was when he had been with us a few months, that a circumstance occurred in connection with this pastime—apparently so innocent and unimportant—that was fated to affect his future fortunes, and those of all of us, in no small degree: on such slight branches of the tree of life do great fruits hang.

Our excursion on the day in question had been extended beyond its usual limits, to Wayford, an outlying hamlet of our village, through which the river Way ran; and, indeed, it was the goodly breadth of that stream which had attracted us thither. Beside the Mississippi, or even the Thames, its proportions would doubtless have seemed small enough; but then we proposed to fly over

it. The autumn was far advanced, and nature wore that pathetic look of beauty which is peculiar to that epoch—the same quiet grace of farewell that is sometimes seen in the faces of the dying. The wind, even on the sand-cliff, did but whisper, and when we descended into the vale, was hushed. There was no sound in the moist air except that of the stream, that seemed to sorrow for the loss of summer, as it swept the banks no longer pranked with flowers. Its broadest part ran through an apple-orchard, the scanty leaves of which, like tempted innocence, were blushing before their fall. Between this orchard and the sand-cliff was a small cottage, the tenants of which were Ruth and Richard Waller—a sister and brother, who, having lost their parents in early youth, had contrived to keep the same home, and support themselves, though perhaps the youngest couple that ever adventured housekeeping. They were still young, not even being of age; but Richard dug for the scythe-stone, and that deadly toil had already affected his health. Ruth too performed that share of the work which usually fell to the lot of Gatcombe women. We could hear across the stream, as we drew near, that chipping of the stone, which might have been likened to the graving of her own epitaph, so sure was it, if persisted in, in the end to prove her doom. At present, however, to judge by her looks, the nature of her toil had in no way injured her. Hearing our voices, she came to the cottage door, shading her eyes with her hand against the sun, and I thought I had never beheld a fairer picture. She was rather over the middle height, and of a most graceful figure; her complexion was as fair as though it had never been exposed to outdoor influences; and her fine brown hair shone in the sunlight like bright threads of gold. It is curious enough that though large eyes are preferred to

small ones, there is a certain charm in eyes half-shut beyond any attraction they possess when open. True, there is a mechanical necessity in the former case to smile; but independently of that pleasant accompaniment, the glance shot through half-closed lids is one of the deadliest weapons in Beauty's armory. In the present instance it clove a heart to the centre.

"How are you, Rue?" cried I, for we had known one another all our lives, though, from Wayford being so far from the Manor-house, we seldom met.

"Nicely, thank you, Master Fred. I hope the Squire and Miss Benita are in good health."

"How is your brother Richard?"

"Well, sir, he is but so-so. He is working in the cliff, you know," she added, as if that was explanation enough of his not being in rude health.

"And you, Rue, you are doing almost as bad," said I rebukefully. "I wish you'd let me bring you one of Aunt Benita's masks; but there—I daresay you would be too conceited to wear one."

"Too beautiful rather, much too beautiful," murmured Cecil's voice at my elbow; his dark eyes gazing upon her with undisguised admiration, his dusky features aglow with delight.

"My cousin Cecil says you are too beautiful," cried I aloud; at which, with a rosy blush, Rue vanished within doors.

"*Now all's dark*," quoted Cecil from one of my father's favourites, and with the full meaning of the author in his deep tones too.

He was not angry at my mischievous repetition of his late remark; I think, on the contrary, he was pleased that the girl should have heard what he thought of her marvellous charms.

"Well, let's have the light again," said I, laughing. "Rue! Rue! do come out and show us where there is firm footing: we are going to leap the stream."

She came out at once, and warned us that the river was very deep just there.

"Pray, don't attempt it, Master Fred, or the folks will say I helped to break your neck. It is shallower and narrower above yonder; and the banks are not so high."

But it was the height of the bank at that particular spot which in reality made the project feasible. Between us and the cottage lay a miniature alpine ravine, which I had little doubt of being able to clear, if only the pole were long enough to reach the bottom of it. As for Cecil, he would have essayed to leap Niagara, even if Ruth Waller had not been waiting for him on the other side of the Falls.

I examined with care the ground which sloped down to the brink of the stream; it was moist and slippery.

"We can't take any run at it," said I doubtfully; "it must be a standing jump."

"All right," said Cecil carelessly, his eyes still rapt on the beautiful girl, who, on her part, was watching us with the utmost interest. "I'm game."

"I've no doubt of that," said I, laughing; "but you'll be dead game, if you don't take care what you are about; there isn't half a foot of pole to spare, and if it breaks—— Upon my life, Cecil, I don't like it," whispered I; "one wants a fir-tree for such a span as this."

"Don't ye, don't ye try it, Master Fred," cried Rue appealingly, and perceiving my hesitation. "You talk of the rashness of us poor people; but we work at our ill trade for our bread, whereas it's sinful to run such a risk as that for pleasure and—"

"If you are afraid, Fred, let *me* go," said Cecil quietly. "Why, after all, it's only a ducking at the worst."

I knew very well that a ducking might not be the worst of it; but my cousin's taunt determined me at once to make the attempt; moreover, despite her entreaties, there was a flush of colour in Ruth Waller's face which showed how deeply she was interested in the performance of the feat, and I did not like to disappoint the village beauty. The words of the heralds in the lists of Ashby occurred to me with ludicrous application to my position: "Love of ladies, death of champions, splintering of lances! Stand forth, gallant knights; fair eyes look upon your deeds!" If the lance *should* splinter in the present case, it was not impossible that the death of the champion might ensue; but still I did stand forth, and looked as gallant as I could under the circumstances. First, then, I went through the somewhat unknightly performance of moistening the palms of my hands; then I grasped the top of the pole, the iron-shod end of which was already firmly placed in the stream; swayed backward and forward once or twice, drew in my breath, and finally launched myself into the air. It seemed to me that I took a long time to get across; the momentum was only just sufficient to throw the pole on the other side; and in the middle, I distinctly felt it "hang;" the effect of which, had the retardation been maintained, would have been to make me circle round the pole, like a toy monkey, and then drop in the river. But the good pole carried me safe over, and almost into Ruth's arms.

"Eh, but you are a gey fine lipper, Master Fred!" said she with enthusiasm, as I stood panting, and perhaps a little proud, by her side.

It was now Cecil's turn to try his luck. I had great doubts—though, of course, I did not express them—

of his safe arrival at our side of the Way. He was not, as I have already mentioned, so skilful in the management of the pole as myself; while I, for my part, had never made a more difficult leap. It was not his habit, however, to lose much time in preparation, and over he came like a rocket—that is, he came about half-way over. When he got so far, there was a splintering crash, which made my blood curdle, for it told me that the pole had given way, which is the great danger of deep leaping. If he should come down upon the broken piece, it might spit him like a lark, and this was just what he had done; and though, happily, he fell aslant upon it, the shock was so painful and violent, that it forced a sharp cry from his lips, which the next instant was stifled in the stream. Quick as a bird, Ruth flew down the steep steps that led from the cottage to the river's brink, and caught him by his clothes as the current swirled him by. Except that he was wetted to the skin, the ducking had done him no harm; but when he had struggled to his feet, we saw that his face was pale, and that he pressed his hand against his side, as though in pain.

"You are hurt?" said I anxiously.

"No, no; it's nothing," said Cecil, who had been thanking Ruth in a faint voice. "I'm a little bruised, that's all. I can't walk very well. I think I should be better if I could sit down a while;" and he looked towards the cottage.

"Do, pray, sir, come in," said Ruth. "But you'll catch your death in those wet clothes. Perhaps you wouldn't mind wearing Richard's Sunday suit, while I dry them before the fire?"

This offer was gratefully accepted; and I took Cecil at once up to Richard Waller's room, and helped him to

change his attire. This was accomplished with great difficulty, for my cousin's breathing seemed much oppressed; and when he caught sight of himself in the little glass in corduroys and a red waistcoat, and would fain have burst out laughing, the attempt appeared to give him great pain.

"I tell you what, Cecil," said I decisively, "there's something wrong with your ribs. I'll leave you here under Ruth's care, and fetch Dr. Cherwell; and if he's not in, I'll at all events bring the pony-carriage from the Manor-house, for it's clear you can't walk home."

I expected opposition to this plan, for Cecil hated to be made a fuss with—even his sister's demonstrative solicitude about his health, and the dangers of pole-leaping, vexed him; but, to my great relief, he made none; so off I started on my errand, leaving Ruth in charge of him. In those days I could run like the deer; but it was a long way to the doctor's, and when I reached his house, he was away on his professional round; then, there was a mile or two more to the Manor; and the groom was not at the stables, so I had to put the pony in the shafts myself, for I did not wish to alarm the household, by letting them know why I wanted the carriage. I had accomplished my task with privacy, and was driving at a canter down the avenue, when, to my great confusion, I met Cousin Jane. She stopped me at once, and with a swift suspicious glance, inquired whither I was going.

"I thought you were out with Cecil," said she. "Where is he?"

I told her the plain truth. He had met with an accident; there was nothing serious, but he was bruised, so that walking gave him pain; and I was taking the pony-trap to bring him home.

"You will bring him home dead," cried she vehe-

mently, the fire glittering in her dark eyes; "and then you will get his money, and be satisfied."

"Jane!" cried I, in astonishment that knew no bounds. "What on earth do you mean? You must be stark mad!"

"I was," said she, controlling herself by a great effort. "Forgive me, Cousin Fred. I am sane now. I am sure that you love my brother, and would rather have him grow up and be happy, than reap any benefit at his expense. You have no selfish thoughts, as some have. Pray, forgive me."

She stepped lightly into the carriage, and seating herself by my side, laid her hand upon mine, and patted it, as though it were the head of a child.

"I forgive you, of course, Jane," said I, withdrawing from this caress; "but how is it possible for me to forget such words? What selfish thoughts do you refer to, and who are those that entertain them? If you mean my father and Aunt Ben—and I know of no one else to whom you can possibly refer—I can answer for their never having harboured a base thought, even in their dreams. They would not speculate upon your brother's death for all the filthy dross that was ever picked up in India."

How angry I was, and how I hated that yellow girl, who squatted beside me like a toad!

"You are shocked and ashamed of me, Cousin Fred," said she penitently; "and I deserve it."

This I did not deny, but flicked the pony with the whip, and drove on rapidly through the village. When we had cleared it, and were cantering along the noiseless sand-road that ran round the foot of the cliff, Jane began to speak again, with great slowness and precision, like a secretary of some mercantile community making his statement in committee assembled.

"In my terror upon Cecil's account, Frederick, and in my anger too, for you know how I have always opposed this leaping, that has now turned out so ill, I said the first thing that came to my lips. It was never harboured in my thoughts at all; upon my word, it was not."

"I think we had better drop the subject," said I drily.

"As you please, Frederick," was the humble reply; "but do not imagine that I have not been punished." She said this with such obvious mental pain, that I really pitied her.

We began to talk of Cecil's accident, and where I had left him, and the like; and she was all calmness and content.

"I am quite sure you did the best for him, poor fellow, that could be done. I daresay it will turn out that he has only a few bruises, which will have no other effect than to make him more cautious. Even a broken rib is not very serious.—My dear cousin, who is that horrible man?"

This ejaculation was caused by the appearance of poor Batty—as Bartholomew Cade, the harmless idiot of the village, was called. He had worked in his childhood in the sand-cliff; and a sudden fall of earth had deprived him of his senses, and left him only instincts, one of which was, unhappily, for drink. He had just arrived from the terrace on the road in front of us, by his usual method of descent, which was, to curve himself into a circle, and roll down like a wheel; and there he stood, shaking the sand from his head and limbs by a grotesque rotatory movement that would have addled the brains of any sane man. As we drew near, he held out a handful of copper and small silver coins, and laughed exultingly.

"How did you get all that money, Batty?" inquired I, as I drove slowly by, lest his weird antics and appearance should startle the pony.

"Selling props," cried he—"props, props!"

"I hope you didn't steal them, Batty?" said I gravely.

"No, no; I cut 'em with the bill-hook."

As we drove on, I explained to Cousin Jane that this poor fellow earned his living by cutting out of the fir-wood the props for the sand-caves, which were bought of him for small sums by the workmen; and how, on one occasion, it had unfortunately struck him that his labour might be saved by taking the props out of a cave, and selling *them*—an idea which, but for the timely discovery of his theft, might have caused great catastrophes.

"I hope he was whipped," said Cousin Jane tartly, with whom whipping was a panacea for all disorders, mental, moral, and physical.

"Nay," said I. "Batty is not responsible for his actions; but he has promised not to misbehave himself in the way of prop-stealing again, and he always keeps his word."

Perhaps the notion of Batty's getting off so easily, outraged Cousin Jane's strict sense of propriety, but, at all events, for the rest of our drive she became more like her usual self. When we stopped at the end of the little lane which led to the cottage of the Wallers, and which was not practicable for wheels, she jumped out, and hurried on, leaving me to tie up the pony. When I followed, she had not entered the house, but was standing at the open door. I was about to ask her why she did not enter; but she shook her head, and held up her hand for silence. Her face was livid, her breath came in thick gasps, and her thin lips were parted with a grin of rage. I looked over her shoulder at the sight which had evoked these unpleasant symptoms. In that apartment of a Gatcombe cottage which is "kitchen, and parlour, and all," sat, all unconscious of our presence, a

pair of youthful rustics. The walls were but of plaster, and defaced rather than ornamented by some highly-coloured daubs of the story of the Prodigal, and of Ruth amid the corn; on the mantelpiece, art was again travestied in the person of an infant Samuel, highly gilt, and with black dots for eyes; on the shelves were a few specimens of common delf; the floor was carpetless; and from the roof depended onions. And yet the human objects in this frame redeemed its coarseness, and presented a fair picture—purest pastoral. Pretty Rue, with head aside, and eyes that feigned an interest in the burning logs, was seated by the fire; and close to her—so close that their chairs touched—sat Cecil in the Sunday suit, with his hand pressed to his red waistcoat, like a love-sick Robin. What he was saying, I know not, but he was looking encyclopædias of affection.

Jane drew me on one side of the porch, and whispered hoarsely: "Who is that woman?"

"Only Rue Waller. She pulled him out of the river, and lent him her brother's clothes. You see," added I mischievously, "Cecil is not so very much hurt by his accident—unless it induces heart-disease." Here I gave a premonitory cough, which was followed by the hasty scraping of chairs within; and when we again presented ourselves at the doorway, the young people were on opposite sides of the fire-place. Rue was blushing like a peony; but Cecil's swarthy face did not change its hue (though it was prone to do so on slight occasion), nor move a muscle: in this respect it showed a striking contrast to its duplicate, for Jane had turned as nearly white as the nature of things permitted.

"I came here understanding that you were hurt, Cecil," said she, with that distinctness of utterance so

significant of pent-up rage. "But it seems that you only wished to get rid of Frederick."

"I might have been hurt," returned Cecil quietly, "had it not been for kind help and tendance."

Jane laughed a little laugh, that was the concentration of contempt and scorn, and surveyed Ruth—to whom he had pointed, and who stood curtseying humbly, yet with great grace—from head to foot. "Well," resumed she, "you have been tended long enough, I think. Is it not time to have done with your farce—to take off those ridiculous clothes, and come home?"

The duplicate faces became now alike in hue.

"I see nothing ridiculous in the clothes which have been so hospitably lent to me," said Cecil sharply; "but I see something very mean and base in jesting at honest people because they happen to be poor."

There was a most embarrassing pause, during which the young hostess gazed on the fire, and brother and sister confronted one another with looks such as they had certainly never interchanged before.

Then "Ruth," said Cecil, with a tenderness in his tone that he seemed to exaggerate rather than to attempt to conceal, "I am greatly obliged to you for your kindness. Your brother's clothes shall be returned to-night; and please to express to him my thanks for the use of them." He held out his hand, which Rue shyly took, and, as he did so, turned round upon his sister defiantly.

"If you have not your purse with you, Cecil," said she drily, "I have mine. You should always remunerate for their trouble honest people who happen to be poor."

"Indeed, miss," said Ruth hurriedly—for Jane had already taken out three half-crowns and laid them on the table—"my brother would be very vexed to think that I took money for" —— The close of her sentence was

lost in a passionate exclamation in Hindustanee; and Cecil snatched up the silver, and threw it, through the doorway, into the middle of the river, where the broken pole was still standing. What he said, I know not; but I am sure, from the expression which it evoked on his sister's face, that the Indian tongue is capable of conveying a strong invective; and after his retort, not a syllable of any language, European or Oriental, did Cousin Jane utter during our drive home.

CHAPTER IV.

Fellow-labourers.

THE pains which Cousin Jane took to set herself right, after that unfortunate day's proceedings, with both myself and her brother, were great and unintermittent. Directly she had made that speech suggestive of the advantage that would accrue to us at Gatcombe if anything were to happen to Cecil, I saw that she would have given much to have recalled it: she had looked, to use a popular and powerful image, as though she could have bitten her tongue out. Her apology and retractation had followed, as I have said, on the instant; and yet she seemed painfully aware that they had been insufficient. If her insult had been directed to myself, I could perhaps have forgiven her; but the insinuation had been uttered, on her own confession, with reference to my father—the least self-seeking and mercenary of men—and it had wounded me to the quick. Her keen intelligence perceived this, and her efforts to re-establish herself in my good opinion were made through the very channel in which she had made shipwreck of herself. Her manner towards Uncle Fred underwent a complete change; she discarded her sullen ways, and endeavoured all she could

to adapt herself to his genial mood. She anticipated Aunt Ben in lighting his pipe and cutting his newspaper for him after breakfast; and even took a part in that long-established recreation of the household, in which he took such unfeigned pleasure, namely, our Dramatic Readings. Hitherto she had icily declined to join them, and had sat apart, engaged, with pressed lips and knitted brow, over a certain intricate Chinese puzzle, and surrounded with a faint atmosphere of sandal-wood (which I smell now), while Bobadil gave lessons in fence, or Mammon in making money. My father Bowdlerised his favourite plays (by no means a task of supererogation), to suit the drawing-room; and Aunt Ben and Eleanor from the rectory, who formed the female portion of our *dramatis personæ*, were hardly worked, and greatly needed Jane's assistance, thus tardily bestowed. There were no stage jealousies amongst us; and indeed Aunt Ben, for her part, would have gladly thrown up all her engagements in her niece's favour, had she been permitted to do so. The dear old soul once confided to me, that whenever her turn came to declaim or protest, to coquette or plead, she felt like some unhappy whist-player who has got the lead and doesn't want it. She would always have been "fourth hand," that is, as far from the leader as possible, and never have won a trick if she could have helped it. Her neighbours on either hand were ever conscious of a melancholy undertone in which she was accustomed to recite her part before it came to her, just as a schoolboy in class occupies himself with his own approaching task, without taking an absorbing interest in the classical renderings of his predecessors. She had the advantage over him, indeed, of being able to calculate to a nicety, and of not being liable to corporal punishment in case of a fiasco; but she had her nervous anxieties nevertheless;

and often and often would my father's grave remonstrant tones, "Now, Benita, Benita!" remind her, like some stroke of doom, that her turn was come, and awaken her to the horrors of her (dramatic) situation. Then would her finger hurriedly retrace some fourteen lines or so of heroic verse, and damp and palpitating, she would depict the woes of Aspatia, and mildly reproach Evadne for having robbed her of her Amintor. Happy for her when Melancholy thus chanced to mark her for her own—when she got a plaintive part in the lot-drawing—and had to recite such dirges as:

> "Lay a garland on my hearse
> Of the dismal yew;"

for, indeed, they suited her feelings to a nicety. Cousin Jane herself was not very well adapted for the deliverance of pert and lively sallies, but showed considerable vigour in vituperation; in particular, she once took my father's heart by storm in playing Katherine to his Petruchio; on which occasion, when we wished one another "good-night," she whispered in my ear: "I am so glad I pleased your father, Fred."

This touched me, and I repeated her remark to Aunt Ben, who observed rather drily, that Jane had seemed of late desirous to please others beside my father.

"True," said I; "and much to her credit."

To which my aunt made no reply. For my part, I was certainly softened towards Cousin Jane, and had by this time almost forgiven her monstrous insinuation with respect to Cecil. As for her brother, he had long been reconciled to her; though, if he had forgotten that scene in the Wallers' cottage, I am quite sure *she* had not. She showed her keen remembrance of it by never so much as alluding to the subject of his hurt (of which, indeed, he soon recovered), and by avoiding all inquiry into the

mode in which he now passed his time. Instead, as formerly, of putting him through a cross-examination (borne with the utmost good-humour) on his return from each day's ramble, and of inveighing against the perils of pole-leaping, she merely hoped that he had enjoyed himself. She would still show her solicitude about him, indeed, by inquiring of *me;* but, as it happened, I could now tell her little of Cecil's proceedings. He was applying himself, it seemed, more assiduously than of yore to his studies with the rector, and would excuse himself from my company on that ground. Thus it happened that I fell back upon something like the old mode of life that I had been accustomed to before my cousin's arrival. I had renewed opportunities of enjoying Eleanor's society, and I took again "long stretches" across country by myself.

During these last, I now enjoyed a new pleasure, namely, the composition of five-act dramas of thrilling interest. My father's tastes and talk, and our evening readings, had at last brought about that condition of mind which, had such circumstances not been taken into the account, would have been called a natural bent for the drama. I wish carefully to avoid the imputation of believing myself at any time to have been a genius: the description of mental food on which I had been nourished, and the poetical atmosphere of my father's study, were probably quite sufficient to account for the existence of such a phenomenon as a playwright of eighteen. At all events, it did exist in my proper person; and once begotten, every incident in my experience tended to its development. My love for Nelly suggested passages of tenderest passion, which I would pour forth to her (very literally) *con amore*, and concerning which I would solicit her opinion without much fear of an unfavourable criticism; the society of Cecil was conducive to the same end, since,

as I have said, the one cultivated talent he possessed was of a dramatic kind, while he had the advantage both of having seen plays acted, and of having taken part in them himself. Nothing would please him better, he said, as a profession in life than to be the Burbage to my Shakespeare; and I am sure he spoke from his heart, and had no conception that he was talking nonsense. Then there was a certain Lady Repton, from whom we had long been expecting a visit, who quite unconsciously played a considerable part in these shadow-plays of mine. She had been a great actress—really a great one, in times when actors and actresses were thought of far more highly than nowadays; and a lord had carried her off the stage, and married her, to the grief of thousands. Lord Repton had been a college friend of my father's, and had promised "some day" to come to Gatcombe, and introduce his wife to the only man in England who still appreciated the classical drama. I looked forward to this vague engagement with an eager expectation, such as a boy with the wild wish to be a sailor might have felt at whose father's house the immortal Nelson was a promised guest. Nor did I, in my inmost heart, despair of persuading her ladyship to reassume her profession, so far as to read a few of my own favourite declamations, in character, if not in costume.

In my walks upon the lonely sand-cliff, I apostrophised universal nature, and sent many a rabbit to his burrow palpitating with terror at my fervid words. On one of these occasions, as, after a long ramble, I was returning by the terrace, just above Wayford, the rain began to fall so heavily that, the shelter of the pines being insufficient, I made for the nearest sand-cave. As I stood in the entrance of it as in a porch, and watched the landscape darkening and dwindling in the down-

pour, I heard a noise from the interior—the trundling of a barrow: the proprietor, whom I knew to be Richard Waller, was doubtless at his work within; and I stepped out of the narrow passage and stood aside, in order to give him egress. A barrowful of the rough scythe-stone in truth it was; but the person who wheeled it turned out, to my extreme astonishment, to be my cousin Cecil. My surprise, however, was surpassed by his confusion. He stood speechless, holding the handles of the barrow very tightly, as amateurs at such labour do, replying to my wondering looks by an uneasy laugh.

"Why, what on earth are you about, Cecil?" asked I. "I thought you were going to be busy with your books all the afternoon."

"So I was to have been," returned he; "but Mr. Bourne was called away to christen a sick child; and I thought I'd come on here, and help poor Waller. His breath is getting very short, you know; and I wanted a little exercise, and—and here I am."

He was certainly there, though it was somewhat difficult to recognise him. His hair and clothes were covered with sand; his face was damp, as I supposed with toil, and wore the pinched and anxious look that was to be observed in those who pursued his present occupation for a livelihood.

"I don't think your sister would like to hear you amused yourself in this way, Cecil," said I gravely, for I was really alarmed at his appearance. "It's far worse than pole-leaping, my good fellow."

"I shall amuse myself as I please," returned Cecil haughtily, "without consulting my sister or anybody else."

"Nay, Cecil," remonstrated I, "you should know me better than to suppose me capable of dictation; but this work, believe me, is very unhealthy; and if you come

here often" (here he dropped his eyes, and bit his lips), "it will most certainly injure you in the end. It's no use your being angry with me, as I see you are. I don't want you to come to harm at Gatcombe, although I *am* your heir-presumptive, cousin."

I spoke this with some bitterness, instigated by the remembrance of his sister's base suggestion, and the next instant regretted my irritation. I expected him to exhibit extreme displeasure, whereas he only replied humbly,

"I am sure, Fred, you wish me nothing but good. I daresay what you have said is very true. I won't help Waller in this way any more. Let us go home."

"Nay," said I, "let us wait till the storm is over."

I saw that my cousin was very impatient to be gone, but I was greatly averse to leave shelter and be wetted through to the skin, when five minutes' waiting would prevent it. Perhaps I was a little piqued, too, at Cecil's having preferred Richard Waller's company to mine, when he found himself freed from his studies (for he knew the direction my walk had taken, and might have met me if he chose), and was consequently disinclined to be conciliatory. The clouds began to disperse, and the sun had already tinged the distant fields, when suddenly the sound of some one singing within the cave, and evidently approaching us, delayed my footsteps on the very point of departure.

"I should have thought Richard Waller had no breath to spare for singing," whispered I to Cecil.

"That's not Richard," said he; and though his tone was careless, I saw him colour deeply; "it's Rue;" and at that moment Ruth (or Rue, as the neighbours called her) appeared at the cave-mouth, having in her apron a number of rough scythe-stones, which she dropped upon

the ground on seeing me, without an effort to reclaim them.

"Lor, there!" cried she, finding her voice much more readily than Cecil had done in *his* first moments of embarrassment, "you gave me quite a start, Master Fred! Who'd ever have thought of seeing *you*? Richard and I were only saying the other day, how long it was since we had seen aught of you at Wayford."

She ran on, in a manner quite unusual with her, and never once, I noticed, looking towards my cousin, who, under cover of this sustained volley of words, began to collect his scattered powers, and presently to add his voice to hers. As for me, I held my tongue, my mind not suggesting any original remark appropriate to the occasion, nor even recalling one out of the wide range of my dramatic reading, rich as it was in "surprises" and "situations." If Ruth Waller had dropped from the clouds, instead of emerging from the earth, I could scarcely have been more taken aback by her appearance; not, indeed, that there was anything wonderful in her being in her brother's "pit"—for so the caves were called, though they were horizontal—but only in her being there in Cecil's company.

"Richard is a good worker, you see, though so scant of breath," stammered my cousin; "and he can supply more than a barrowful of scythe-stones at a time; so Ruth and I both help to carry them out."

"I understand," said I drily; for indeed so much of the matter was clear enough.

"Perhaps Master Fred would like to see Richard," suggested Ruth to Cecil.

Her coolness staggered me, but had a contrary effect to that which it was designed to have; the familiarity of her address at once suggested to me that this could not

have been the first time by many that my cousin and she had met since the day of his accident at Wayford. Moreover, her hint of Richard's presence in the pit had a savour of prudery about it, which, under the circumstances, did not impress me favourably with the fair speaker. That her brother *was* actually in the cave, I had no doubt, since, in the silence that followed her last remark, I could hear the strokes of his pickaxe as they grated against the stone, or fell muffled on the damp and yielding sand.

"The rain is over for the present," said I quietly; "we had better be off at once before there's another storm, Cecil." And without waiting for his reply, I started at my usual pace for home.

My cousin remained behind for a few moments, as I knew he would, and presently overtook me. We walked on without speaking for some time, then he laid his hand upon my shoulder, and we both stood still.

"You are not pleased with me and Ruth, I fear," said he.

"I am not my cousin's keeper," replied I coldly; "but if you ask me whether your behaviour seems to me judicious, I must honestly tell you, I do not think it is."

"Judicious?" reiterated he, with scornful vehemence. "What, in heaven's name, would you have me do, Fred? I love this girl with all my heart and soul; nothing shall part me from her—nothing, *nothing!* I am only happy when I am with her. What other excuse can I frame for being in her company than that of helping her brother in the pit? You, who pride yourself on your ingenuity, tell me *that.*"

Disturbed as I was by this confession, I could scarcely help smiling at his asking me to frame an excuse for the very interviews which were the cause of my uneasiness.

"My dear Cecil," said I, "the whole affair is bad, believe me, and will be worse in the end than at the beginning."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired he, almost with ferocity. "Do you suppose I mean Ruth harm? Do you take me for a blackguard?"

"No, Cecil, I don't; if I did, I should go straight to my father, and tell him precisely what has happened. If you were otherwise than the noble-hearted, affectionate fellow I know you to be, I should have seen Richard just now, and told him to his face that he was helping to bring his own sister to shame. It is useless to be angry with me, Cecil; such would, I assert, without doubt be the result in nine cases out of ten. In yours, the best that can possibly come of such a courtship is still disappointment and disgrace."

"Why disgrace?" asked my cousin sharply.

"Because it would be disgraceful in one of your position to marry one in hers."

It may be objected that for a young gentleman whose studies were dramatic, my judgment was somewhat too practical and commonplace. But there were many reasons that compelled this apparent inconsistency. In the first place, I foresaw the distress that such an attachment must needs cause my father, as my cousin's host and guardian; in the second, although I had had small experience of the world, the nature of my reading had developed a perception of the character of others which was rarely at fault; and my late interview with Ruth had impressed me with the conviction that the girl was crafty, if not designing.

As for the whole tone of the discussion between my cousin and myself, I am quite aware that it was something quite different from what it would have been had

we had the advantage of a public-school education. My father's teaching had fixed within me a respect for women, which Beaumont and Fletcher had not destroyed. In this respect, he would even have been deemed Quixotic; for his very definition of cowardice was about the same which the man of honour and the world applies to gallantry. As soon as I was old enough to understand him, he had taken pains to convince me that inferiority of station in a woman, considering her natural tendency to idolise mere rank, ought to be as much her safeguard with generous hearts as are, in other matters, the innocence of childhood or the feebleness of age; and I had at least imbibed so much of his lessons as disinclined me for that ribald talk and thought of women so common among those who have acquired, with the rudiments of the ancient classics, the tone of fashionable schools.

As for Cecil, he was incapable of a deliberate baseness; and by nature so frank, that it was impossible he could be deceiving me as to his real intention. I did not, therefore, fear for Ruth as I did for him. Her marvellous beauty was cause enough for any man's falling in love with her; whereas I opined that Rue Waller was not the girl to forget the plain features and dusky hue of my cousin Cecil in her appreciation of the qualities of his heart. That he did not forget them himself was evident from his reply to my observation, that marriage with one in Ruth's position would be disgraceful.

"Position?" echoed he. "Do you suppose, then, that I don't know what is *my* position as compared with yours, or, if your kindness mislikes so personal a comparison, compared with that of your father? I am—God help me!—but an ignorant half-caste; only tolerated—I will not say by you or yours, but by the world at large—on account of my wealth. Without my riches, for

what should I be valued—I had almost said, cousin, by whom?" He dropped his voice, and spoke these last words with a tender pathos that went to my heart.

"Cecil," said I, "it pains me to hear you speak in this manner; and yet what you have said emboldens me to use an argument which otherwise I should have shrunk from. If, indeed, you be such as you describe (though your face is comely enough in my eyes, and the blood that moves in your veins seems that of a brother), and if it be your wealth alone that is likely to attract strangers towards you, what is it, think you, that has attracted this young girl, whose poverty must, by contrast, have made your riches seem to her to be ten times as great as they really are?"

"You are right," returned Cecil quietly. "Ruth loves me not, except for the wealth that I shall bring her. But I love her for herself; and it is enough for me that she does not loathe me."

I looked at him with wonder, in which, perhaps, some contempt involuntarily mingled.

"Ah! you fancy you have loved," said he, in low grave tones, with an affectionate smile; "but you have never really done so, Fred; or rather, I should say, it is not possible that your love and mine should be of the same sort. You and Eleanor have each something to give, something to exchange; but, to the woman whom I would fain persuade to love me, I have nothing to give—nothing to barter for her love; so, you see, Fred, *I must buy it.*"

Never shall I forget the air of indescribable wretchedness with which he uttered those words.

"I have never deceived myself in this matter," continued he, "and much less Ruth. To affect to help her brother at his work in yonder pit is, indeed, a feeble

pretext of sympathy, which imposes upon neither of us; but I can't give him money, Fred. When she asks me for it—which, perhaps, she will do some day—then it will be time enough to give him money, and so to buy her."

If Cecil's face was plain, it was at least freighted with an emotion more tender and pitiful than I had ever seen expressed in human features. And he was going to waste all that wealth of love upon a woman whose perceptions would probably never detect its existence, and who would—to judge her even by his own estimate—be doubtless prepared to exchange for it a few hundreds of pounds! The thought of a compromise had, indeed, at first occurred to me; but no one who now beheld Cecil's face, and heard his tones, could have entertained it for a moment. Whatever *she* might have taken, nothing but herself, I felt sure, would have contented *him*.

"And how is all this to end, Cecil?" asked I; "for every dream must have some end."

He took no notice of the tone of incredulity, which, I confess, was affected rather than real; for my cousin's nature I knew to be full as resolute as it was impulsive.

"The end is, Fred, that I shall marry her."

"Nay," said I; "that will be but the beginning of the end—the first step in a life of wretchedness."

"We cannot foretell the future, cousin," answered he quietly; "but, unless something happens, I shall marry Ruth when I come of age."

"Unless what happens?" inquired I, pleased to hear that he was in no passionate haste, and in good hope that some loophole of escape for him would present itself in the intervening years.

"Unless your father comes to hear of it," said he, "in which case I shall marry her at once—at all hazards."

There was nothing to prevent him. Nor was my father the man, even if he had the power, to adopt any stringent measures in such a case. "It will be a sad blow for your sister Jane," said I, expressing a reflection rather than advancing a new argument.

For the first time, a shadow of irresolution seemed to flit across his face; but it passed away immediately, leaving it calm and determined as before. "If my sister gets to know of it," said he, "that would have the same effect of precipitating matters." Here he hesitated. "But I tell you frankly, Fred, that I wish her not to know. It would not shake my purpose—nothing can, nor shall. But might I ask you, being more near to me as friend than kinsman, not to tell her, not to tell any one about Ruth?"

What could I do but promise? What was the use of telling when the news would only hasten on his rash resolve to its fulfilment? So I said: "Your secret, Cecil, is safe with me. I would that I could wish you joy of it."

"You do not wish me ill, I know," said he, with his winning smile.

I shook my head. Indeed, I did not wish him ill, but I knew that ill awaited him. I think he knew it too; but neither he nor I could have imagined, nor even have dreamed, save in some weird, horrid nightmare, the shape that ill was doomed to take.

CHAPTER V.

A Spy-glass.

THE secret that Cecil had confided to me remained of course undivulged, nor did we even speak of it to one another. It was useless to discuss a subject whereon there was not only no possibility of our agreement, but in which my cousin had allowed that all the sense and

reason were on my side, the infatuation and resolve on his. I felt that the plot was thickening, and for some time awaited the catastrophe with anxiety and trepidation: to borrow a metaphor from my favourite pursuit, I looked every day for "a strong situation," "a scene" in which my father, Jane, and Cecil would prove the principal characters, and I myself be stigmatised as an accessory before the fact; but as weeks and months passed by without sign, I grew more tranquil; just as one who, on board a powder-ship, has seen his friends smoking their pipes for years without an explosion, begins to think there can be no such very great danger in the practice after all. It was true that Cecil, though showing even a warmer affection for me than heretofore, was more seldom my companion out of doors than ever, and I could not but conclude that he was passing his time in Ruth's society; but engaged myself in an equally pleasant way with Nelly, I either grew insensibly more tolerant, or became willingly blind to consequences in his case, as I did in my own. For, regarded by unimpassioned eyes, my courtship of Eleanor was almost as injudicious as Cecil's devotion to Ruth. I had no fortune of my own whatever, and even on my father's death would only succeed to a very moderate estate; while Nelly was entirely dependent on her grandfather, whose favourite boast—and one which he was wont to brandish in his son the rector's face, to the great irritation of that learned man—was, that he could leave every farthing of his money to whom he chose—"Ay, sir, though it were to the County Lunatic Asylum."

Sometimes I fancied, from Jane's manner, that she suspected something amiss in her brother's proceedings; but, much to my satisfaction, she had long since ceased to inquire concerning them of me. My father was the

very last man to whom an idea of anything of the sort would suggest itself; his confidence in the good conduct of all beneath his roof being supreme. My aunt concerned herself solely with the affairs of the house and of the village; and besides, as maiden aunts are apt to do, she considered Cecil and myself as boys; young gentlemen of too tender years to be suspected of a serious passion.

Thus matters stood, when a letter from the north apprised us one morning that Lord and Lady Repton were at last about to pay their promised visit. My father handed it to me with a smile. "There's a message for you in it, Fred, from the great tragedienne;" and I took it with trembling fingers. It was a wordy and pompous epistle (though the writer evidently intended to be cordial), and gave me no high opinion of his lordship's talents; but the contents of the postscript made my heart beat. "Lady Repton bids me say that, in coming to Gatcombe, she looks forward not only to the pleasure of making the acquaintance of my old friend, but of his son, young Shakespeare." I was mercilessly roasted about that message; my father called me "the marvellous boy;" and Cecil sketched out with great humour a newspaper paragraph, headed *Elopement in High Life from Gatcombe Manor*. But I believe they both sympathised with my excitement. Once again my cousin reperused with me my little stock of original dramas, all of which had been indebted to him for some stroke of fancy, if not for whole speeches, and even scenes, in the old days when we had "Beaumont and Fletchered" it together; and out of them we chose what we judged to be the best to lay before this coming Siddons. I pictured to myself a heroine of imposing port, who would talk blank verse, and, when silent, look unutterable things. I dreamed of

her as the Tragic Muse, investing my brows with a crown of amaranth. In my walks with Eleanor herself, I grew taciturn and meditative, and when asked reproachfully what I was thinking of, would reply with audacious frankness, "Of Lady Repton."

At last the morning of the day of her arrival dawned. I had not the courage to go and meet her on the road (I say *her*, because his lordship did not excite within me a spark of interest; we had a fair sprinkling of lords in Sandylandshire, with most of whom I had some acquaintance, and the Wrays of Gatcombe held up their own heads too high to bow before mere title). I walked out upon the brow of the moorland, and, with a glass, swept the road from the railway station, until my eyes hit upon her approaching carriage. I knew it by its four post-horses, without which, as my father told me, my Lord Repton never travelled; and it was perhaps from the knowledge of that circumstance, combined with the laboured style of his letter, that I had come to the conclusion that he was a pompous and pedantic old fellow. The road wound beneath me, here a ribbon, there a thread, for miles; and there was more than an hour to spare from the moment I first caught sight of them to that when it would be necessary to turn homewards, in order to welcome their arrival. In the mean while, I sat down on the moor, and watched their approach, or surveyed the spreading landscape, clad in the pale green of spring. While thus engaged, and my gaze happening to be directed towards Wayford, I noticed a female figure emerge from the fir-wood, and come rapidly towards me across the moor. At first, merely because I associated her with the locality from which she seemed to come, I thought it was Ruth Waller; but the figure was taller than Ruth, and, as I soon remarked, attired far better than

that rustic beauty had ever been. She wore a veil, which prevented me for some time from recognising her; but at last, to my extreme astonishment, I discovered that it was Cousin Jane. I was surprised; for Jane was a girl who hated walking, not from laziness, for she was by no means wanting in energy, but because it was such a vulgar thing to do. The commonest persons walked, and she wished it to be well understood that she was not a common person. If she could have been carried in a palanquin by obsequious bearers, with a relay of those human beasts of burden running behind her, she would, I think, have taken a good deal of outdoor exercise; but as it was, she restricted her walks to the grounds about the house; she never accompanied my aunt in her little expeditions into the village, except to pay a state visit, once a month or so, at the Rectory; and deemed even taking a seat in the pony-carriage a condescension: yet here she was, miles away from home, alone, and on Shanks his mare! On what errand could she have gone to that fir-wood? in which lay no other attraction than that which drew her brother thither, I knew not how often—but it might be five days out of seven. Was it possible that the same magnet, though from a very different cause, had likewise attracted her? I trembled for poor Cecil, and felt, I confess, not a little uncomfortable upon my own account, as the accomplice, or at least the confidant, of his misdemeanours. If I was correct in my suspicions, there would without doubt be a domestic tornado of the first magnitude.

She came on at rapid speed, like a thunder-storm (as I imaged her) against the wind; and so busily was she engaged with her own thoughts, that she would have passed me without notice, had I not sprung up and addressed her—not that I was anxious to be the first to meet her wrath, but because, if my fears were well grounded,

I wished to prevent her going straight to my father, and troubling him with such grievous news just at the moment of our guests' arrival. That something had agitated Jane most deeply, I could see, though she still kept her veil down, and even held it with her hand, as though she was aware that her features told a tale that she would have concealed; but her voice was quiet and composed as she expressed her surprise at seeing me.

"Why, I thought you would have been miles away, Fred, on the road to meet your play-actress!"

This remark was injudicious, for I at once concluded that she had counted upon my absence in that direction to keep her own expedition secret. She doubtless spoke on the impulse of the moment, for even her contemptuous mode of referring to Lady Repton showed naturalness and lack of design.

"Nay," said I, "it is I that should be astonished. I had no idea that your dainty limbs could have carried you so far. May I ask what was the inducement?"

"I had a headache," she replied, "and your Aunt Ben recommended me to try the moorland air."

"Well, I hope it has done you good, cousin?"

"Yes," said she, with a curious gravity in her tone; "it has: it seems to have cleared my brain."

"You should have tried the fir-woods," observed I carelessly; "Dr. Cherwell says that their pungent scent is worth all the aromatic salts in the world."

"I did try them," returned she: "I went into the pine copse above Wayford."

"Perhaps you would not be quite so frank, cousin," thought I, "if you had not observed that I carry a telescope." If she had really discovered anything, it was plain that she was not going to disclose it; and if, on

the other hand, she had nothing to disclose, there was no harm in my continuing my cross-examination.

"Did Aunt Ben recommend you to wear a veil?" inquired I. "I should have thought that all the air you could get on such a day as this would not have been too much."

"I am not so hardy a plant as you, Fred," she rejoined; "but, as you say, it is warm now.—There, does *that* please you?" and she threw up her veil with a forced laugh.

"Of course it pleases me," said I gallantly; though, as a matter of fact, I had never seen Cousin Jane look so uncomely. Her face had the same livid look which I had seen on it but once before (when she had stood in the porch of Richard Waller's cottage), and her lower lip was bitten through and bleeding. As thus she smiled upon me, and showed her glistening teeth, the idea of a terrier, that had been fighting with rats, occurred to me involuntarily; and rather to escape from such a spectacle than with any other motive, I offered her the use of my telescope.

"You have keen eyes, Cousin Jane, and if you can really discover the sea from this spot, as my father contends we can, this is the very day for the experiment."

She thanked me, and taking the instrument, turned it in the desired direction, which was over Wayford Wood. Her hand did not "wobble" with the weight of the glass, as is the case with most women when they take an observation with that instrument, but was as steady as a rock.

"You don't see it, Jane, do you?" said I, after a little.

"No; but I should like to do so. I won't give it up yet."

There was something so peculiar, so curt and decisive, as though I had threatened to take the glass from her by force, in the tone of her last words, that it drew

my own gaze from the carriage of our guests, which was now plainly to be seen nearing the village, and transferred it to herself. Then I noticed that the telescope was depressed, so as no longer to command the horizon, but was fixed upon the terrace beneath Wayford Wood.

"I think I see it now," said she hoarsely; "just a thin blue line—"

"But you are looking too much inland, Jane—if you'll allow *me;*" and I offered to take the glass.

In an instant she had dropped it fifty or sixty feet upon the terrace below, where it, of course, was smashed to atoms.

"Dear, dear! how very stupid of me, Fred!" said she; "it was all my own clumsiness. O, I *am* so sorry."

It was certainly through her fault that the thing had happened; but I was by no means sure that clumsiness had anything to do with it. She seemed to me to have dropped it with malice prepense.

"Pray, forgive me, Fred," continued she. "The first day I go to Monkton, I will get you another, twice as good; that is"—for I suppose my countenance showed that I rather resented that form of indemnity—"if you wouldn't be offended."

"The ground is soft, and perhaps there is no great harm done after all," said I; and in two or three bounds, after the Gatcombe fashion, I had descended the steep cliff and reached the terrace. I was not sorry that Jane could not follow me. I was angry with her, not so much for dropping the glass, as for supposing that mere money could supply a substitute for what she knew I valued as my father's gift. That was so like her. She did not even wait to see whether it was destroyed; for when I had picked up the fragments and looked towards the spot where she had stood, she was no longer there. She had

doubtless hastened home. At that moment I heard the rumble of the Reptons' carriage in the village street, and turned to follow her example; but, as I did so, caught sight of Cecil coming along the terrace from Wayford. I knew that black speck in the distance to be him from the rapidity of its movement; for, when alone, my cousin always ran like Man Friday, or as though he bore the Fiery Cross—it was a vent for the superfluous energy of his nature. I had not to wait long before he came up with me, wide-eyed and panting; his dark cheeks warmed with colour, and his whole face so bright and joyous, that I had scarce need to ask, "Have you seen Ruth to-day, Cecil?" It was the first time I had spoken of her for months; indeed, the only time since our one serious talk together upon the subject, and I felt some degree of embarrassment in alluding to her. But Cecil answered, with all possible simplicity: "Yes, Fred; I have but just parted from her."

"On the terrace," said I, "or in the wood?"

"It was just at the edge of the fir-wood."

"So I thought," replied I gravely. "To that parting —a very tender one, no doubt—your sister was a witness. It is no great consequence, however," added I, "for I believe her suspicions had no need of such confirmation. I am much mistaken if she has not been watching you all the afternoon." Then I told him how I had seen Jane come veiled out of the fir-grove, where Richard Waller worked; how angry she had looked behind that veil; and how she had dropped the telescope, to prevent, as I believed, my being a witness as well as herself to his tender adieus. "That you are discovered, Cecil," said I in conclusion, "I feel quite convinced."

"No doubt, no doubt," said he, but in an irresolute tone, and looking yearningly towards Wayford, as thought

since matters had reached this pass, he had half a mind to return *thither*, instead of to Gatcombe. "I think, however, Jane will keep the matter secret, Fred; otherwise, why should she not have disclosed it to yourself?"

"Perhaps she means to appeal to you in private," suggested I.

Cecil shook his head, still wearing that troubled air. If he had been capable of fear, which I knew he was not, I should have said he was afraid of his sister; but, at all events, it was evident that the idea of her displeasure was a source of the greatest disquietude to him. He walked home by my side, dejected and silent; and his despondency seemed to communicate itself to me. I could not shake off a sense of some impending evil, so strong and so engrossing, that even the long-looked-for delight of meeting Lady Repton was already robbed of half its relish.

CHAPTER VI.

Lady Repton's Riddle.

By the time we got home, our guests had arrived, and Lady Repton had retired to her room to dress for dinner. His lordship, who was conversing with my father in the drawing-room, received Cecil and myself with affability and a couple of stretched-out fingers, sparkling with rings. His knuckles were so swollen with the gout, that it was as great a wonder how the rings got there as how apples are found in dumplings. He would certainly never get them off again in this life; and I could not help wondering within myself whether, when he was dead, his executors (or on whomsoever the duty might devolve) would cut off his fingers, or commit all those precious stones to the grave. (What *is* generally done, by the

bye, in such painful circumstances?) His complexion was very beautiful, and gave him an appearance of youth, which was renewed (like the eagle's) every morning. His hair and moustaches were black and silky. His teeth were very white and fine; and yet one's first idea upon seeing him (which was also a permanent one) was, "What a very old gentleman this is!"

If you referred to the *Peerage*, however, you would find that John Lord Repton was by no means so very old for a peer of the realm—a class which emulates for longevity that of life-annuitants and incumbents of college livings. He was a ruin—but comparatively a modern one—of the *renaissance* style. His air and manner were not only artificial; they did not belong to real life at all. Congreve or Wycherley might have created him. When he patted his snuff-box, and took a pinch, raising his jetty eyebrows, one naturally expected him to ejaculate, "Stap my vitals!" In place of that appropriate remark, he would cry, "Good gad!" in a sharp, shrill voice, and hand the box to the nearest person, though it were Aunt Ben or Jane. He prided himself on many things: his rank, his wife, his castle in Yorkshire, and his filbert nails; but, above all, upon his taste in literature. Upon this point my father would as soon have thought of giving in to him, or to any man, as of kissing the pope's toe; and very stubborn arguments they were wont to have together, which always ended by Lord Repton saying, "You may be right, sir—you *may* be; but, gad! I used to have some little reputation as a critic too." Indeed, from the constant use of that expression, he had been well known in London in old days as Reputation Repton. He took a great fancy to Cecil from the first, and nicknamed him (to his great indignation) Tippoo, after Tippoo Sahib; the plunder of whose treasury had, as I after-

wards learned, proved the foundation of the Repton fortunes. His lordship's father had been in high command in India, and one of his uncles had been among those brave English captives who, refusing to serve the tyrant's guns against their fellow-countrymen, had been decapitated by his order. To hear the old gentleman narrate the story was a great treat; the chivalrous incidents of the affair were comparatively disregarded, but his description of the "loot" which ensued after the assault of the British was very vivid and picturesque. "I had it from my noble father's own lips, sir. . . . There were no less than three thousand horses, one hundred elephants, and two hundred camels, in that great potentate's private stud; and, begad! six hundred women;" at which point in the narration he would wag his wicked old head so very appreciatingly, that it was a marvel he did not wag his wig off.

If his lordship was not very good-natured, he was very courtly, and fell at once to praising the old Manor-house in a way that was most grateful to my father. "Now, I like this," he would say; "there are no gim-cracks; everything is solid and serviceable. We have no such oak panelling as this in Yorkshire; these thick walls and deep bay windows are just to my taste. The garish lightness of your modern houses is my detestation: all here is shadow and calm, and breathes of ancestry; just as the layers of the cedar, with their depths of shade, betoken the revolving years. Do you see the image?—Take a pinch—take a pinch, young sir;" which, in my uncalculating courtesy, I did, and nearly sneezed my head off.

"That's a bad sign," said his lordship gravely. "A man of birth should take to snuff as naturally as a duck to water. If I had not known your sainted mother, sir,

I should entertain suspicions of your not being a Wray of Gatcombe. Gad! I remember the days when your father here took bushels of it."

As I was well aware that my father had never taken a pinch of snuff in his life, this latter sarcasm at least fell pointless. Lord Repton's memory was not so good as it had been; and since to repair it was impossible, he had hit upon the ingenious device of constructing a past out of his imagination, and quoting its events as though they had in reality occurred. My father never contradicted him on such points—even when he himself was introduced upon the stage, as in the present instance—but contented himself with a smile of incredulity equal to a folio. To do his lordship justice, this habit had become so natural with him, that he was far more persuaded that he was speaking the truth than any of his hearers. I am anticipating, of course, since these peculiarities did not evince themselves sufficiently to be characteristic during this our first interview; but I had seen enough of his lordship, before he retired to his dressing-room, to convince me that he was something quite different from what I had imagined. Pompous perhaps he was, but certainly neither a bore nor stupid. In fact, I felt both pleased and grateful to him; for he had already given me an outline sketch for one of my *dramatis personæ*, in a play which, as usual, I happened at the time to have in hand.

But if my conjectures had proved fallacious as to his lordship, they had gone infinitely more astray with respect to his wife. I had looked for a Mrs. Siddons or a Miss O'Neill. I found—well—a lady of plump proportions indeed, and (as I knew from my father's mouth) of mature age, but—at least by candle-light—a fairy; a bright and beautiful being, with eyes that absolutely

danced with vivacity; rounded limbs that never stirred except with grace; a voice that filled the air with sweetness; a carriage like that of Juno, when it pleased her to *be* Juno, but more often like that of Venus. Her dress was cut exceedingly low. ("I never!" was Aunt Ben's muttered ejaculation when her ladyship first swam into the room, and certainly *I* had never.) Her light-brown hair, of which she had an immense quantity, fell over her bare shoulders, and shone like gold, as it well might, for it was powdered with gold-dust.

"How French!" said Aunt Ben.

"How beautiful!" said I, when we talked of her that night.

"You are both right," was my father's witty rejoinder, "for she is Paris and Helen in one person."

Though her ladyship bore her years like a feather, she would not, doubtless, have looked so young, had it not been for the contrast she presented to her husband; but by the side of that ancient fowl she seemed quite a spring chicken. He was evidently exceedingly proud of her, and crowed feebly over the admiration she excited; but of that which gave her interest in my eyes—the fact of her having been an ornament of the British stage—he was by no means proud. This was made evident within the first quarter of an hour.

As my father was taking her in to dinner, she stopped in the hall, to admire its vast proportions.

"What a capital place it would be, Mr. Wray, for private theatricals! The stage would have three practicable doors—which is most unusual—and the gallery is already there, in your magnificent staircase."

She made nothing of stopping the whole procession behind her, and imperilling the warmth of the soup,

while she uttered these observations, which, however, made my heart leap within me.

"I am sure," said I audaciously, "if you were to ask my father, Lady Repton, he would not refuse to test the capabilities of the hall as a theatre."

"Is he so very good-natured?" said her ladyship, looking from him to me with quite an eager air. "There is nothing in the world I should enjoy so much."

"What, what, what?" exclaimed the old lord apprehensively, as he toddled up with Aunt Ben. "What does she want now?"

"Lady Repton has expressed a wish, which, I am sure, shall be gratified as far as lies in my power," said my father graciously, "to see some private theatricals in our hall."

"Private fiddlesticks!" ejaculated his lordship hastily. "Very difficult, very ridiculous! Who is to act, I should like to know?"

"*I* will act!" exclaimed Lady Repton, with a sweep of her rounded arm, and in the tones of the Tragic Muse. "There will be nothing very ridiculous in that, I hope."

"My *dear* Lady Repton," expostulated the old lord, "the idea is preposterous. I won't have Fred Wray's hall pulled all to pieces—I won't indeed. Carpets up, curtains torn, servants drunk, and house set on fire—that's what is meant by private theatricals. Pooh, pooh!"

"He's afraid of my going on the stage again and being fallen in love with," said her ladyship slyly, and squeezing my father's arm. "It *is* so hard on me, to whom the smell of the footlights is like a breath of fresh air."

Nothing more was said upon the matter at that time, though I, for my part, was well resolved it should not drop out of mind. But what had passed caused the

stream of conversation at dinner to turn into a theatrical channel, in spite of Lord Repton's endeavour to dam it, and though he *did* damn it under his breath.

"Did you ever chance to see me, Miss Wray," asked her ladyship, addressing Aunt Ben, "at the Garden or the Lane?"

Aunt Ben opened her round eyes to their fullest extent, and smiled an embarrassed smile. If Lady Repton had said "*in* the garden," she would have replied unhesitatingly, "No;" but the use of the word "at" informed her that something was intended beyond what met the ear.

"I played Desdemona at both houses," continued her ladyship in explanation.

"Of course, of course," exclaimed my aunt; "how stupid of me! I remember now what a treat you gave us all. Let me see; it was the very year when Fred here" —she was just about to say "was born," but fortunately stopped herself, as with a sharp curb, and substituted— "had the measles."

"Then *you* never saw me, Mr. Frederick?" said her ladyship, turning towards me with a sweet smile.

I felt, beneath the table, Cecil's foot press mine with mischievous emphasis. I knew that I had scarcely, as the phrase goes, "been born or thought of," when Kitty Conway had retired from the stage, and exchanged her tinsel crown for a real coronet; and it was only by a great effort of self-command that I was able to reply with gravity: "I have never been inside a theatre, Lady Repton, nor so much as even to London."

"How I envy you!" sighed she. "What pleasures await you!—My dear Lord Repton, do you hear what our young friend says? He has never seen a play."

"Hum—ha!" muttered her husband, so gruffly, that the tone almost implied that he wished he had never

seen one either.—"Do you grow your own mutton, Wray? This haunch is capital."

"And your cousin there," continued her ladyship, motioning towards Cecil, "is he in the same pastoral state of innocence as to the drama?"

"O no," said Cecil; "I am an old stager."

"What an impudent young fellow!" cried she. "I daresay that's what he calls me. But that shows me he can act. It is necessary for an actor to be impudent; while, on the other hand, all good actresses must be unaffected, modest, and retiring." She laughed aloud, yet very musically, and shook her head till the gold-dust flew about it like a halo. "Seriously, however, my dear," continued she, addressing Jane, who was looking serious enough, and indeed morose, "I would never advise any young lady to go upon the stage. If you feel any strong attraction to that profession—"

"I *don't*," said Jane, opening her mouth just wide enough to emit the words, and then pursing it up again with a snap.

"That's fortunate," said her ladyship, regarding her with great coolness; "because it affords great temptations to vanity; and I am afraid we women are all vain. Coryton, who had 'the Garden' in my time, once remarked of the profession of the stage, that it would be a charming one except for the actors and the actresses.—You remember Coryton, Lord Repton?"

"Yes." It was plain he did, so well that he did not care to be reminded of him.

"Coryton used to play the 'heavy fathers' so admirably," continued her ladyship, "that when I married, I got him to give me away."

"He must have been a very generous fellow, Repton," said my father, with a good-natured glance at her ladyship.

"Stuff and nonsense!" muttered the old gentleman angrily, and without catching the gallantry of the allusion; "not a bit of it. Deuced lavish with other people's property; that's all."

I thought my father would have choked. His sense of courtesy contended nobly with his sense of humour; but during the struggle, his eye caught mine, and then he fairly roared. Lady Repton laughed as heartily as he, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, because, as I now conclude, her complexion was not quite suited to the passage of tears.

She was certainly a very good-humoured woman, but, as sometimes happens, not good-natured, or rather only good-natured as regards men. She was bitter against her own sex, probably because, in her own case, she had found them to be censorious. Jane and she had many sharp encounters together: the one, all gauze and glitter, reminded me of a dragon-fly with a sting in its tail; the other, so dark and sombre, of a water-beetle, furnished with a pair of sharp pincers that had no respect for the peerage. Their contest began at once. After dinner, her ladyship sat down at the piano, and favoured us with some bright French chansons, which she sang with great sprightliness of manner.

"That woman," whispered Cousin Jane in my ear, "sings like a singing chamber-maid;" a criticism (I was compelled to own to myself) as accurate as it was severe. Presently, Jane took her place at the instrument to accompany Cecil, who played the flute a little, and her ladyship came and sat by me.

"When is it to be, Mr. Fred?" inquired she behind her fan.

"When is *what* to be?" returned I with genuine innocence.

"O, come; do you suppose I am blind? Cousins are not within the prohibited degrees, we know; and I suppose she is as rich as Crœsus."

I laughed almost aloud, so that the musician looked round from her playing with a displeased air; the idea of my marrying Cousin Jane tickled me so excessively.

"She is not at all rich," said I; "and you are quite mistaken in your other supposition."

"Of course that follows, if my premises are wrong," said her ladyship coolly. "But is it really true that you are not engaged? I have no right to pry into your secrets," added she, with amazing quickness (whereby I knew that she had seen my colour rise); "I was of course only referring to the Begum."

I thought this both rude and cruel, and made no reply; but she went on quite unconcernedly. "Lord Repton and I concluded the affair had been arranged, and that she was here on purpose. I am glad that we were wrong; at least if I were you, I should much prefer to marry your aunt. What makes her—I mean your cousin—so dull and discontented, and also so uncivil? She never says thank you to anybody. I call her *La Belle Dame sans Merci*."

"Do you?" said I, unable to repress a smile. "And I heard you tell Cecil that my father was like dear Don Quixote. May I ask what you call *me*?"

"Well, I shall call you Fred, if you will let me, and if others will let me;" and here she gave a meaning glance towards Cousin Jane. "You have not answered my question yet, you know. Let us suppose it's a riddle. Why is Cousin Jane so dull and discontented? Come, guess."

"My dear Lady Repton," said I, "you are too severe.

My cousin is an orphan, and among persons who, with one exception, are comparative strangers to her—"

"That's just my case," interrupted her ladyship; "yet I'm not dull."

"That is evident," said I gallantly.

"O, I don't mean as to wits," continued she; "your cousin is sharp enough—keen as a razor, I should say, and perhaps quite as dangerous. But is it possible that you can't guess my riddle?"

"Not I, indeed: I give it up."

"You are very stupid, Mr. Fred, or else a sad hypocrite, which is almost as bad. You know when a door is not a door, I suppose?—Good. You know also when Love is deformed; I daresay?"

"When it's all on one side," said I.

"Very good. Then, why is Cousin Jane dull and discontented?—There, I see you have it at last. The idea of a young fellow—who writes plays too—not knowing when a girl is in love with him." Here the music ceased. —"O, *thank* you, Miss Wray; that is most beautiful indeed. Do, pray, play us something else."

But *La Belle Dame sans Merci* was deaf to her entreaties, and, regardless of the visitors, got out as usual her Chinese puzzle.

CHAPTER VII.

Call me "Kitty."

LADY REPTON was one of those women who never come down to breakfast, or are seen by anybody but their waiting-maids, until the day is far advanced. Many ladies in her position do the like; but had she never married a peer, and remained Kitty Conway all her life, she would still have been a late riser. This habit was

now an advantage to her; it gave her the opportunity of repairing the ravages of time, and presenting as bold a front as possible—and some of her own sex averred it was very bold—to the public eye: she appeared at once all smiles and pleasantness; not stiff and formal, as even the most charming women sometimes will be under the chill influence of morning—for breakfast-time is a most trying epoch—but resumed the friendly intercourse of the preceding evening exactly at the point where it was broken off. Though it was obvious, even under these favourable circumstances, that she was not without obligations to art, this was only so far as her personal attractions were concerned. She thoroughly understood that naturalness of manner, provided one is not by nature a fool nor a brute, is the greatest of social charms; that courtesy and politeness being understood, there is indeed nothing so attractive; and accordingly, out of the abundance of her heart did her pretty mouth speak. Thereby, Kitty Conway had doubtless "shocked" a large section of society during her somewhat checkered career; but she had endeared herself to that portion of it which it was most worth her while (and every lady's while) to please. Even Aunt Ben, who had at first been certainly among the "shocked," was brought to confess of Lady Repton, that she didn't believe there "was *much* real harm in her," though she always stuck to it that there was some.

Almost the first words Lady Repton spoke to me that day were, "And now, Mr. Fred, where are these great plays of yours?" For which I could have kissed her, and I don't think she would have been much offended if I had.

"Let us go somewhere where we can be quite alone," said she, "and read them."

I took her to Aunt Ben's boudoir—which, notwith-

standing its name, was rarely used except by her favourite cat, who sat there whenever a fire was lighted—and produced my chosen manuscripts with a beating heart. Of course they were crude productions, and had very little originality; but I had at least copied from the best models, and the result astonished and delighted her.

"Why, my dear Mr. Fred," cried she, when she had read out a passage or two, which I had specially selected for her, "you are quite a genius!"

I blushed, and bowed.

"And do you really think there would be any chance of my getting them acted?"

"These?—as they are?" said her ladyship, laying her taper fingers upon the precious pile. "Certainly not, unless there is a theatre at Hanwell or Bedlam. No sane man would think of putting on his stage a play in which there are no carpenter's scenes."

"Carpenter's scenes!" repeated I, my mind at once reverting to the wood-yard; "why carpenter's?"

How merrily she laughed! The laughter of no child was ever blither or more musical than hers; and yet, for fear it should have displeased me, she became at once supernaturally grave, and entered into explanation.

"You don't give your hero and heroine time to dress, Mr. Fred, nor scarcely to breathe; while as for the necessities of the scenery, you have ignored that altogether. You would have done very well in the old days, when a man came on, and said, 'This is a wood,' or, 'Please to imagine a room in the king's palace;' but now-a-days, when woods and palaces are actually set up, you must give time for their erection by means of carpenter's scenes. In a literary point of view, my dear boy'—and here she patted me on the head—"these plays, considering your youth, are prodigies of excellence; but as dramatic

works they are—well, ahem!—unadapted for representation. In the first place, you have too many good characters; I don't mean virtuous ones, for that would indeed be fatal, but individual personifications. To play these would require actors and actresses of which no company possesses more than one or two. Don't you see?"

I didn't see at all.

"Surely," said I, "in Shakespeare's plays, for instance, there are not one or two characters only, and the rest dummies."

"That was the great mistake of Shakespeare," replied her ladyship coolly. "He was too great a man to write plays for representation, and that is why they are so much read and so seldom acted. When I played Desdemona, which I did both at the Garden and the Lane' (this piece of information may for the future be taken as spoken, though *I* heard it about a hundred times), "there was a pretty good Othello, except that he only came up to my shoulder, and I could have smothered *him* with ease; but our Iago was a fool. Shakespeare's men, upon the whole, are wiser than his women, and that is another practical mistake of his; for very few wise men eyer take to the stage as a profession. The true reason why what are now called Sensation Plays are so popular is, because they rely upon the scene-painters, who are excellent, and upon strong 'situations,' which suit everybody who can strike an attitude, fall without hurting himself, or die in convulsions. It is from the same cause, at least so far as the managers are concerned, that leg-pieces are so popular."

"Dear me!" said I, not wishing farther to expose my ignorance by inquiring into the nature of "leg-pieces."

"All this," continued her ladyship, "I daresay destroys your illusions respecting the British stage; and yet I do

assure you that if anything were to happen to Lord Repton—which heaven forbid!—I would go back to it to-morrow."

"I wish you would," said I mechanically, forgetting the domestic calamity that must needs precede her doing so in my desire to have a friend so potent behind the scenes. "How I should like to see you act in—in anything!"

"You selfish boy!" cried her ladyship, shaking her jewelled finger in rebuke; "you were going to say, 'in one of my plays.' Well, why shouldn't you do so? We were talking of private theatricals last night; let us get some up. Here is your adaptation of *Ivanhoe*, which is the very thing—not too long, and not too serious. I'll play Rowena."

"My dear Lady Repton," cried I in an ecstasy, "you are too good!"

"I hope not," answered she comically; "I had almost rather be 'no better than I should be.'—Yes, Rowena will do very well. I will let my back-hair down, which I heard your Cousin Jane say was not my own. She must do Rebecca, I suppose; though where shall we ever find a Brian de Bois-Guilbert venturesome enough to carry her off? Do you know where to lay your hand upon a Brian?"

At the moment, I could think of nobody but "the Alchemist," as we called him—old Mr. Bourne. If he always kept his visor down, he might possibly pass for the bold Templar, although he had little of that fiery character in his composition. He would do anything to oblige Cecil, as I had only too good reasons for knowing. (It was not for *my* sake that his grand-daughter was permitted to come to the Manor-house so often, though she did come, bless her! for my sake.) Lady Repton, who knew nothing of Mr. Bourne, could, of course, make no

present objection to the cast; and in the mean time I resolved to look about and try and find a better man. There was one Frank Close, a clergyman's son, in our neighbourhood, who had broken a leaping-pole once or twice in my company, and might break a lance, or at least bear one, as Bois-Guilbert. Cecil, we arranged, should be Ivanhoe—to whom, as to Rowena, a much more important part was assigned in my dramatic version of the story than in the original; and I myself was to be Wamba, the son of Witless.

"We'll put it Wamba only, in the bill," said her ladyship gravely, "for fear your father shouldn't like it."

I laughed, and told her how much she was mistaken in supposing my father capable of receiving annoyance from such a source; and she laughed too, but shook her head, in sign that we must agree to differ on that point.

"Your father is charming, I allow; but he is a man, and man is vain." No argument could push her from that canon. "Whatever man is vain about, in that he can be more easily wounded than any woman: his *amour propre* is more sensitive, and he is less forgiving."

Although somewhat indignant, upon my father's account, at this sweeping condemnation of mankind, I did not care just then to combat Lady Repton's views; indeed, so far as myself was concerned, I am afraid I confirmed them; for the idea of getting my Rowena played, though only at Gatcombe, by such an actress as Lady Repton, made me feel as vain as a peacock. Her ladyship was also greatly pleased at this notion of reappearing in public even on our humble stage. Our united wits were concentrated upon the realisation of it. I felt quite sure that the gallantry of my father would cause him to consent to any scheme of amusement which his guest might propose; and on this point my companion was

ready to believe me, though she protested that if the thing were done it would be for my sake, and not for hers.

"You can get your father to do anything, you spoiled boy; I see *that;* and, upon my word, I don't wonder at it, for really, Fred, you are very nice."

"It is very nice of you to say so," said I with an ingenuous blush. "You don't know how I have been longing to see you, Lady Repton; and—"

"Call me Kitty," interrupted her ladyship. "When we are at our plays, at all events, I will be Kitty, and you shall be Fred. You longed to see me, did you; and yet, when I came—you were going to say—I turned out to be so different from what you expected, eh?"

"Well, yes," I stammered; "I was going to say that, or something like it."

"I knew you were," said she, smiling. "I daresay you pictured to yourself an awful personage, with the airs of a tragedy queen. *'I called for water, boy; you bring me beer!'* and so on. I am afraid I must have disappointed you sadly, Fred."

The pathos she threw into these last words so melted my heart, that I know not of what passionate compliment I might not have been guilty. "Indeed, Kitty—" I had smilingly begun, when the door was opened, and in walked Lord Repton. I protest that I had no more idea of making love to his lordship's wife than of stealing his wig, and yet his sudden appearance gave me quite a qualm, nay, a spasm of conscience, the severity of which was by no means mitigated by his first words, delivered with stately disapprobation.

"I am sorry to interrupt your *tête-à-tête*, Lady Repton, but I thought that I heard somebody say 'Kitty.'"

"And so you did," said her ladyship, with her musical laugh, and pointing to the hearth-rug, where the cat,

aroused by the opening of the door, was stretching its legs and bending its back. "Puss and I, as it happens, are both Kitties."

"Hum—ha!" said his lordship, regarding the animal with a grave air. "I had no idea that Kitty was a name of common gender, or was ever applied to a Tom-cat."

This idea so tickled him, that he at once discarded the suspicion which had apparently suggested it, and was put in high good-humour.

"And do you really mean to say, young sir," said he, in a bantering tone, pointing to the piles of manuscript upon the table, "that you have spoiled all that paper with fine writing?"

"Indeed, my lord," said her ladyship with some warmth, kindled, not so much on my account, I fancy, as because she had had a little fright upon her own, "Mr. Frederick has not only written fine things; some of them are very good."

"I daresay, I daresay," replied her husband, with lofty condescension. "I remember, when I was a lad of the same age, I was always writing too. The things may have been nothing of themselves, but I had no cause to be ashamed of them: they showed culture. In after-years, though you may not have chanced to hear of it, young gentleman, I had some little reputation as a dramatic critic."

"Indeed, I have heard my father say so many times, my lord," said I submissively. "If I could venture to ask your opinion now upon these humble efforts—"

I had fished for perch in a shower, but I had never seen a bait swallowed so greedily as was this adroit suggestion of mine by my noble friend. He had sat himself down, and fastened his gold spectacles upon his aristocratic nose, before I could finish the sentence.

Nothing would please him better, he said, than to place his poor services as a critic at the disposal of a son of his valued friend.

My heart so smote me for my hypocrisy that I could only murmur some disjointed words of thanks, and push the manuscripts towards him. We should, without doubt, have been in for a lecture on the Unities, had not woman's wit come to the rescue, and shaped the threatened infliction into a weapon wherewith to win the very thing on which our hearts were set.

"Why don't you ask Lord Repton's opinion upon the matter we were discussing?" said her ladyship as she kneeled on the hearth-rug smoothing the cat. "Let him decide whether your *Elfrida* or your *Ivanhoe* is most suitable for our dramatic representation."

"What, what, what?" said the old lord in a fretful tone.

"Why, you must know that we are going to have some private theatricals at Gatcombe," continued she: "Mr. Wray has set his heart upon giving his neighbours a little treat in that way, and I have promised to help him."

"Not to *act*, Lady Repton, I do hope?"

"Well, that is as you please, my lord, of course. I had hoped you would have consented to my doing myself the great pleasure of stabbing Mr. Frederick in the back as he sat upon his pony—we could easily get the pony into the hall—on the point of his departure from Corfe Castle."

"I shall certainly forbid your doing anything so supremely absurd, and—and—unbecoming, Lady Repton."

"There! didn't I tell you so?" said her ladyship, appealing despondingly to me. "And it's *such* a pity! because I know I could make something out of a part like Elfrida's; whereas, in the other play, the character of

Rowena is merely a sketch, hardly worth the trouble of letting one's back-hair down for, in order to look the part."

"I object to your acting *at all*, Lady Repton," said her husband, taking at the same time, however, into his trembling hand the *Ivanhoe* which I respectfully tendered.

"I knew it, my lord, and I said so," returned her ladyship plaintively. "I did not even venture to promise myself that innocent pleasure. But I am sure you will not put a stop to our projected amusement altogether, by refusing me permission to aid the young folks here by saying half-a-dozen words in what is, after all, but a child's play. You are too good-natured to do that, I am sure."

"But why the deuce can't they play the thing without you, madam?" inquired the old lord, still testily, but not without signs of yielding in his tone.

"Because, my dear Lord Repton," said her ladyship, taking his unwilling hand and folding it in her abundant tresses, "there is nobody here who looks like a Saxon princess except me. Miss Wray is rather a brunette, you see; whereas Rowena was a blonde, as I am. There will not be the least occasion for any theatrical costume. I shall wear the diamond tiara you were so good as to give me, with my white silk; leave my chair for the mimic stage, which will be no stage at all, to say the few words that have been assigned to me, and then return to your side. Indeed, we should never have troubled you about the matter, only we wished to have your opinion upon some dramatic points; for whatever is worth doing at all, as I was telling Mr. Frederick, is worth doing well."

Here a pebble struck the window; and upon my rising to answer a signal commonly employed by my father when he wished to attract my attention from without, I saw him standing in the garden.

"I must positively forbid your boring both my guests, Fred, or at least both at one time," said he, "with your dramatic compositions. They tell me you have got Lord Repton up there as well as her ladyship, and I insist upon your releasing him without ransom. Tell him I want a good Yorkshire opinion upon my new cob."

"Yes, yes," said the old lord, appearing at the open window; "I'll come, I'll come. I've some little reputation as a judge of horse-flesh, and I believe it is merited. —I'll look over your play in the evening, Mr. Frederick;" and off he went.

"We must take care he does not do that," said her ladyship comically—"Kit, Kit, Kittie;" and then she began to laugh immoderately. "My dear Mr. Fred, what a scrape we were very nearly in!"

But, notwithstanding Lady Repton's modest resolve to wear only her own white silk as the Saxon Rowena, she was very solicitous that the rest of the *dramatis personæ* should be suitably attired; and it was arranged before we left the boudoir that an embassy should be sent to Monkton to hire the necessary dresses at the theatre. We took my father's consent to our dramatic entertainment for granted, though, in due time, Lady Repton did not fail to thank him for it. He was considerably astonished, but much too polite to offer any objection beyond shaking his fist at me.

"You must go and break this news, sir, to Aunt Ben," said he. "It is she who is Lord Chamberlain, and from whom your license must issue." But he went with us, for all that, to back our humble petition.

"I am sure I will do all I can," said my aunt, looking at him doubtfully; "but—I don't pretend to know anything of play-acting—but won't they hurt the hall?"

"They will probably burn down the house, my dear,"

was my father's encouraging reply. Then he looked at me, and quoted from his favourite Marlowe:

> "The northern borderers, seeing their houses burn'd,
> Their wives and children slain, run up and down,
> Cursing the names of *thee and Lady Repton*."

Her ladyship clapped her hands, delighted. "Perhaps Mr. Wray would act himself?" suggested she in a stage-whisper.

"I trust he will not dream of acting anybody else," exclaimed Aunt Ben hastily.

"Don't you think we could persuade him to play Bois-Guilbert, in place of this Mr. Bourne?" observed her ladyship insinuatingly, and without noticing my aunt's indignant protest.

"What Mr. Bourne?" inquired my father.—"You don't mean to say, Fred, that you have proposed to put the rector into chain-armour?"

"No, sir," said I modestly. "I meant Mr. Bourne the elder."

"Worse and worse!" cried he. "Why, he's nearly eighty; though, I daresay," added my father under his breath, "he'd be happy to come for a shilling a night and his supper."

"Eighty!" exclaimed Lady Repton in her turn: "what Rebecca in the world will stand being made love to by a man of eighty! How dare you, Mr. Fred!"

Then I had to explain that I had merely suggested Mr. Bourne in order not to throw any difficulties in the way of our scheme at starting; but that I felt sure Frank Close would play the part—as indeed he eventually did. Lady Repton did not fail, however, to reproach me, the next time we were alone together, for this audacious duplicity.

"You will say anything to gain your ends, it seems,

you wicked boy. I have altered my good opinion of you altogether. How do I know that we have even secured a Rebecca? Are you quite sure that your Cousin Jane will act?"

"I am quite sure that she will not," said I, laughing.

"Well, that's pleasant hearing, I must say; but I hope you see your way out of the difficulty."

"Yes," said I. "There's a young neighbour of ours —you'll see her to-night at dinner—Miss Eleanor Bourne; I am sure she will oblige us in the matter, and she will look the part to perfection."

"Then she must be very beautiful," observed her ladyship sharply.

"She is thought to be good-looking," returned I coolly, "and she is very dark." And thus we settled it.

Now all was bustle and preparation; and Aunt Ben busied herself in writing the invitations, for there was no time to lose, since the Reptons' stay with us was to be very short. It was decided that a dress rehearsal should take place, for the amusement of our humbler friends in the village, on the day before the grand entertainment, and in the mean while there was much to do. Cecil copied out the parts; Lady Repton suggested the arrangements for the stage; and my father loosened his purse-strings cheerfully. I don't think I was ever before so happy, though I felt a little disconcerted that same evening when welcoming Eleanor in Lady Repton's presence.

"So *that* is the young neighbour of yours, is it, Master Fred," said she slyly, "who is 'thought to be good-looking'! I shall find an opportunity of telling her after dinner what you said of her. 'Very dark.' Yes; and I think you have kept her very dark from *me*."

"I forgot that you knew nothing about her," said I, with rather an awkward laugh; "Eleanor is a very old friend of ours."

"So it seems," said her ladyship dryly. "I observe that you squeeze hands."

Old Mr. Bourne was certainly right in the remark he expressed that night (if not in the pronunciation of it), that Lady Repton had "the heye of a nawk."

But though I do verily believe that she was displeased for the moment to discover that Nelly and I were lovers, she took to her very kindly, and they soon got to be excellent friends.

CHAPTER VIII.

Dramatic Preparations.

WHAT a revolution can one person of wit and will effect in a whole household, however prone to peace and lethargy! The silent Manor-house now resounded to the blows of the carpenter, as though it had been one of her Majesty's dockyards, while provisions arrived (for the contemplated supper) in stores as if to furnish forth an Arctic expedition. Aunt Ben, ordinarily so phlegmatic, positively simmered with excitement and sense of responsibility; and even Cousin Jane bestirred herself to the extent of volunteering to hear our parts. In the case of Lady Repton herself, no such tutoring was supposed to be necessary; and indeed she had boasted to me that she was a most excellent "study;" but disuse, I fancy, had somewhat affected her powers in this way; for she was never without her scraps of paper, and in the middle of a conversation would suddenly reply to one in the mediæval style, and give the cue with immense significance. At church, too, in the Wray pew (as it was called)—a little curtained snuggery in the gallery, which might well have excused the impropriety, as reminding her of a stage-box—she was wont to mix up with the responses certain tags

and phrases which were sometimes longer than the sentences for which they were substituted, and overlapped them, so to speak, in a most extraordinary and indecorous manner. Nothing was said about it, though my father raised his eyebrows a little, and Aunt Ben lifted her hands in horror. It was generally understood that her ladyship did not "mean anything wrong." Certainly, that was my view of her conduct, and still is, though I had a much greater experience of her eccentricities than the rest of the household. At this distance of time, it will be thought neither a breach of confidence nor an act of vanity to confess that her ladyship made downright love to me. But she was perfectly well aware that it was an absurd thing to do, and occasionally burst out laughing in the middle of it. "One may not marry one's grandmother, Fred, nor even fall in love with her," she would say, as if to reassure me, when matters seemed to be going a little far; or, "What sad lines time has ruled in my old face," when she had been putting it unnecessarily close to mine. That there was no reality in her little endearments, I think I could almost have convinced Nelly herself. I don't believe she was even "keeping her hand in" for that time which she vaguely spoke of as "when anything should happen to dear Lord Repton;" but she was a born actress, devoted to love-making on the stage, and was content to play Helena even to so cruel a Demetrius as myself. No flower-juice on earth could have ever made me blind to Nelly, or to look on "Kitty" with any other eyes than those of the most modest, though affectionate, regard. Her conversation, however, at all times delighted me, and especially when she spoke of dramatic matters, which generally formed the topic of our talk. Her wit, therefore, must have been great indeed, since she did not hesitate to damp my

hopes of succeeding as a playwright, and even of my getting "acted" at all. "If Shakespeare himself had not had a share in the Globe Theatre, my dear, he would not have been the great success he was, for the simple reason, that he would not have had the opportunities. The stage-door is not more closed against the general public than is the manager's ear to the voice of the unknown writer of dramas. He won't be bothered with him, not even so far as to give him a hearing. He will answer no notes, however courteous; he will return no manuscript, however valuable."

"Then a manager must be a brute in human form!" cried I indignantly.

"Undoubtedly he is, my dear boy," was her grave reply; "if at least he is so fortunate as to possess the human form, for I *have* known some managers without even that: being intensely selfish, they hate trouble of all kinds; and they have an insurmountable objection to spend money. These two peculiarities cause them to accept French adaptations, written by hack writers, in place of good original dramas, that they would be put to the pains of selecting from a heap of literary rubbish, and for which, perhaps, they might have to pay a reasonable sum."

"But how, then, is an unknown dramatic author to get his chance at all?"

"By writing his play expressly to suit the capabilities of a particular actor or actress, and getting him or her to bring it out for him—just as I am now bringing out your *Ivanhoe* for you upon the Gatcombe stage. Only, all the profession, my dear Fred, are not so good-natured, I assure you. A gentleman of my acquaintance once wrote a very charming comedy upon an express understanding with X, a certain eminent actor, that he should bring

out the piece; the principal part was exactly suited to his talents, and he had even allowed that the play was sure to take. But still it remained unacted. At last the author lost patience, and demanded an explanation. 'I have been kept shilly-shallying long enough,' said he (just as you will be, my dear Fred), 'and really begin to think that this play is not coming out at all. I would rather give a hundred pounds than be disappointed in this way.' 'My *dear* friend,' returned X in his friendly way, 'why on earth did you not say so before? That is the very thing—I mean your hundred pounds—for which (from motives of delicacy) I have so patiently been waiting.'"

"What a villain!" ejaculated I.

"Perhaps," said her ladyship coolly; "but a very smiling and agreeable villain, I do assure you."

While the general conditions of the British stage were thus being expounded to my astonished ears, no pains were spared to insure the success of that particular ornament of it, my mediæval drama—or, to speak technically, to make *Ivanhoe* "go." We had already had more than one rehearsal; and upon a certain Thursday, the date of which became afterwards of very serious importance, Cecil and I started for Monkton, to hire the dresses. They could not be procured before, for the simple reason, that the Thespian wardrobe in the cathedral city was limited, and that the actors were using them; but the company was now disbanded, and the manager was glad enough to turn an honest pound or two by us amateurs.

It was very kind of my cousin to go with me, at a time when all studies, save our dramatic ones, were suspended; and he would, as I well knew, have gladly spent his holiday elsewhere; but, of course, not a word was said of *that*. The subject, as I have said, was a

tabooed one, and indeed it did not at that time even suggest itself to me.

The behaviour of Cousin Jane had of late been so conciliatory, that it had in a great measure removed my suspicions of her having discovered her brother's secret, and besides, my mind was full of the play. My astonishment, therefore, was considerable when suddenly, as we drove along, Cecil observed, apropos to nothing: "What a charming Rowena my Rue would make, Fred!"

His quiet use of the possessive pronoun alarmed me more than the most passionate eulogy on her beauty could have done. *His* Rue, indeed! Why I couldn't have said more if I had been speaking of my own Eleanor! "Well," returned I, smiling, for I thought it best to treat the matter as lightly as I could, "I don't suppose Ruth Waller would play the part so well as Lady Repton."

"I am not sure," answered he gravely; "she would *look* the Saxon princess every inch, and she has far more dramatic talent than you imagine."

"But I never imagined her to have *any*, my dear Cecil," returned I in astonishment. "How should she have? What could have evoked it?"

Cecil laughed—not scornfully, but with the good-natured confidence of a man whose position is beyond ridicule. "Well, Fred, I might reply," said he, "if I had a mind to be uncivil, How came *you* with your knack of writing plays? And, Who evoked *that?*"

"I should answer, Cecil, that my reading of plays begat my writing them; partly that, and partly, I suppose, I must have had some natural bent that way at first, which, it is likely enough, might never have shown itself but for my father's encouragement. Why, at seven years old I used to sit on his knee, and, drawing a paper-knife,

speak Macbeth's speech: 'Is this a dagger that I see before me?'"

"Well," said Cecil, "and I have taught Rue."

"Not sitting on your knee," laughed I, "I hope!—Pardon me, my dear cousin," I added hastily, for it was plain to see that I had offended him. "Indeed, I meant no harm. Ruth Waller is a good girl, I know; but it does seem to me so very strange that she should be capable of acting in a stage-play."

"Why not?" returned he coldly. "Talents are not given to us in proportion to our riches, else I should be cleverer than my sister Jane; and as to birth, does not your father's favourite Bianca say:

> 'Mean folks are as worthy
> To be well spoken of, if they deserve well,
> As some whose only fame lies in their blood!'

Or hear Ben Jonson:

> 'We stand too much on our gentility,
> Which is an airy and mere borrow'd thing
> From dead men's dust and bones, and none of ours,
> Except we make or hold it.'"

My cousin's tone had a certain scornful fire I had never before noticed in it; and for which, though I regretted the source that kindled it, I admired him none the less. It was doubtless very foolish of him to have taken up with this beautiful beggar-maid; but others, thought I, besides King Cophetua had been similarly infatuated: for it must be remembered, that though I had played the mentor in this matter with much becoming gravity, I was then but eighteen myself.

"Of course," said I, "my dear Cecil, I agree with every word of that: there is nothing so despicably Brummagem as the rubbish that is talked about Birth: but just as the associations that belong to your noble swell from

his earliest years are disadvantageous, just as he is liable to be spoiled by flattery and the habit of having his own way—and *is* spoiled—for he generally grows up to be a fool—so is your poor lad, and more especially your poor girl, begirt from the first by associations of an opposite kind, but at least equally disadvantageous to *them*. It is not Ruth Waller's fault, for instance, that she is familiar with certain scenes that—to say the least of them—must tend to vulgarise a woman's nature."

"Ruth's nature is not vulgar," observed Cecil curtly.

I shrugged my shoulders, and flicked the pony with the whip.

"It is useless to argue the matter, Cecil," said I presently; "you might as well contend, on the other hand, that the born swells are wise: when they are so, they are miracles, that's all. Perhaps Ruth Waller is a miracle; for your sake I hope she is—How fine the cathedral tower begins to look!"

"Never mind the cathedral, Fred. Listen to me; you are the only friend I have in the world. What are the "certain scenes" with which you say Ruth has been of necessity familiar, and that must needs have done her harm?"

"Well," said I, "scenes of drunkenness, for instance. It is impossible it can be otherwise. I have myself seen Richard Waller as drunk as a pig within these few days."

"Yes," replied Cecil sorrowfully, "it is terrible. She does what she can to keep him sober, but it is hopeless. He is diligent enough, but the half of what he earns is spent in drink. Well" (here he spoke with cheerful gravity, like one who has weighed all the disadvantages to be encountered in a design, and still is fixed), "of *that* wretchedness at least—I mean their poverty—there will be no more when Rue is mine."

"It is a sad look-out," said I, "nevertheless, to have a drunkard for a brother-in-law."

"True," returned Cecil; "but you do not value the compensation as I do. You do not know Ruth. Her beauty is her least recommendation."

"She is certainly most beautiful," said I.

"Ah, yes; there is no one like her—none."

In his mind's eye, it was evident the boy beheld her; his face grew radiant, his tone became bright and joyous; and by the time we reached Monkton, he was in higher spirits than I had ever known him. He seemed resolved to forget all his trouble in the mission on which we were bent; while as for me, it, of course, gave me an intense pleasure. I shall never forget the amusement our visit to that little dusty, musty theatre afforded us; the first edifice of the sort into which I had ever set foot; so different from everything I had heard or pictured to myself of the Temple of Thespis; the stage with the gilt off with a vengeance! The little "'Ebrew Jew," its proprietor, did away with my illusions more completely, however, than even the establishment itself. He was humility and insignificance personified; and seemed as incapable of rejecting a drama from anybody as of accepting one; and yet, he was a real live manager—when there was anything to manage, which did not always happen, dramatic affairs at Monkton being very intermittent. His great object appeared to be to persuade us to hire certain wigs which he exhibited, one by one, with excessive pride. They were not so attractive in themselves as to induce us to wear them for our private use, while for a mediæval drama they were clearly inappropriate. He had evidently, however, never even so much as heard of an anachronism, and combated that objection with great vigour. In private theatricals, he contended that the most important thing

of all was to conceal your personal identity; and there was nothing so certain to effect this object as wigs. Eventually, to please him, we did hire a magnificent wig and beard for Isaac, Rebecca's father, who was not represented in the drama at all. We got a very tolerable suit of armour for Bois-Guilbert, not much above two sizes larger than Frank Close, who was to wear it; and a palmer's cloak—which I suspect was used at funerals in the town—for Ivanhoe. As for myself, I secured a most marvellous jester's suit in which to appear as Wamba. It was of a light salmon colour, and formed of some elastic woollen material in one piece. When I had crept into it, it was fastened behind by two buttons, and there I was, dependent for subsequent deliverance upon the charity of my friends. If I could only be half so funny in speech as I was to look at, the success of the comic business of the drama was undoubtedly secured.

Laden with these garments, and much other tinselled spoil besides, we returned to Gatcombe, to exhibit them to the admiring household. Even Lord Repton expressed his satisfaction upon the whole, although, had he gone with us, the result would have been, doubtless, even still more successful. "He had some reputation," it seemed, as a judge of mediæval costume, which could not have failed to have been useful to us.

Cousin Jane alone absented herself from the display of our borrowed plumes. She had complained of headache, it was said, and had shut herself up in her room all day, where she had requested that she might not be disturbed.

For the rest of us, it was an evening of great excitement, for the dress rehearsal, to which the farmers and principal village folk had been invited, was to come off on the ensuing afternoon. How little we guessed that in

place of our modest little drama there was to be performed—a Tragedy!

CHAPTER IX.

A Tragedy after a Farce.

AT breakfast the next morning, Lady Repton, for a wonder, made her appearance; but Jane kept her room, as she had done throughout the preceding day, still troubled with her headache. I am afraid this did not interfere with the merriment of our party, reinforced as it was by the presence of Eleanor, whom we had bespoken for the entire day. Nothing, of course, was talked about but the afternoon's rehearsal, and quotations from the play were frequent, which, interspersed with ordinary talk, had a comic effect enough. To my father, however, must be adjudged the palm of electrifying the company, and especially Aunt Ben, by his application, to my own unhappy condition as playwright, of these lines from Marlowe's *Faustus*, uttered suddenly in sad and sonorous tones:

> "O Frederick,
> Now hast thou but six bare hours to live,
> And then thou wilt be damn'd perpetually."

Though spoken in jest, these words did not tend to remove the nervousness which had taken possession of me, and it was with a ghastly grin that I acknowledged the sally. Mere gibes and jokes, so long as they did not take this Cassandra shape, I did not mind; which was fortunate, for no one spared me. Cecil boldly addressed the most affectionate speeches to Eleanor before my face, under the borrowed shield of Bois-Guilbert; and Lady Repton lavished upon Cecil all the tenderness (and something more) with which I had en-

dowed Rowena. Then she would turn to me, and ejaculate: "Poor faithful fool!" with such contemptuous pity that Aunt Ben got quite indignant upon my account. When Frank Close arrived, and we all put on our costumes, the fun became positively uproarious. His headgear was so much too large for him that his eyes, which should have "flashed fire through his visor bars," were lost somewhere between that spot and his mouthpiece, so that he could see nothing, and had to be led about. As for me in my salmon suit, I was thoroughly ashamed of myself, and looked very much of the same colour as my apparel. Frank Close, too, whose humour was of a practical turn, did not mend matters—and, indeed, he did precisely the reverse, for he made a hole in my inexpressibles—by perpetually prodding my unprotected limbs with his sword. The three male characters of the drama, indeed, were faint and sore with laughter before they emerged from the "green-room" and presented themselves to the public eye. Our two actresses excited nothing but admiration, while their costumes were perfection. Lady Repton really looked superb, notwithstanding that the remorseless light of day fell full upon her; and the beauty of Rebecca was (as Rowena herself confessed) such as to have excused any indiscretion on the part of the Templar.

Ah me! what a bright joyous time it was! how full of jest and gaiety! A day wherein Youth, Love, and Friendship made holiday together, and asked Wit to join them!

And yet we could scarce have been more merry or better pleased among ourselves than were those who came to gaze upon our show—the farmers of the parish, with their wives. Stout Fiveacres, whose family had held the self-same farm for centuries, and yet who was, I verily believe, the very first of them who ever saw a play;

young Bargate, from the Glebe House, with his bride of three days old, whom this unprecedented attraction had withdrawn thus early from her modest seclusion; and old Braintree, from whom all his race had dropped away, except the little blue-eyed grandchild, whom he had asked special leave to bring: "She would take up no room," he said, "as she always sat upon his knee."

Not until the company had all assembled did Cousin Jane appear and take her seat in the front row beside my father. She looked ill and pale, and also nervous, as I had never seen her before.

"Your cousin appears anxious," remarked Lady Repton.

"Yes," said I; "she is afraid of Cecil's coming to grief in his part, which I am sure she need not be."

"Nay, I think she is afraid of the piece itself not going off as it should do," answered her ladyship slyly.

"I am sure that is not it," said I, "for she was opposed to our having the play from the beginning."

"Yes; for two reasons: first, because you take the jester's part, which she considers inconsistent with your dignity; and secondly, because Eleanor plays with you. What a terrible young fellow you are, to have thus involved three innocent young creatures—for you know how *I* dote upon you—in your wicked meshes!"

Her lively ladyship retained her own opinion on this point, as was usual with her; but although she had been the first to open my eyes to Cousin Jane's *penchant* for myself, I felt convinced she was wrong in this particular instance. Jane's present anxiety was certainly upon Cecil's account, not mine. Her eyes followed his every movement; her ears seemed to await his words alone, throughout the play; and so far from my being chagrined at her want of interest in the drama itself, I felt more favourably towards her in consequence. Whatever might

be urged against Cousin Jane, it was certain that she really loved "Old Cecil" (as I affectionately termed him), and was demonstrative enough in all that concerned *him*.

At what precise part of the representation it happened, I cannot tell, for the shock of subsequent occurrences destroyed all recollection of such details; but it was at a point when all the *dramatis personæ* were on the stage together, that a strange sensation seemed to affect the servants on the staircase, which, as I have said, served the purpose of a gallery. At first there was only whispering and crowding together; but presently one of them —it was Anne, the parlour-maid—stood up, and looked towards my father nervously. All eyes in the body of the hall, including his own, were, however, fixed upon ourselves.

"Master—sir!" said Anne.

My father looked up, in common with every one else, at this unexpected interruption, except Cousin Jane, who still kept her eyes fixed upon her brother, at that moment on his knees before Rowena, and even when he looked round, she never turned her head.

"What is the matter?" asked my father gravely.

"The house is on fire; I knew it would be, Fred," cried Aunt Ben reproachfully.

(Considering that our entertainment was an afternoon performance, and of course without footlights, it was rather unreasonable in her to attribute such a misfortune to my poor drama.)

"No, sir," said Anne; "it's not fire. But a terrible accident has happened at the sand-cliff; and I thought I ought to tell you."

"To whom?" cried Cecil.

Even in that moment of increased excitement, it seemed to strike the company as strange that Cecil should

have put this question instead of my father; perhaps it was the feverish anxiety of his voice, so different from the tones of tender passion in which he had just been addressing Rowena, but, at all events, Anne turned to him, as though she had known he was the person chiefly interested.

"It's the Wallers' pit, Mr. Cecil, over against Wayford—"

The next instant there was a sharp clang of the door, and Cecil was gone. The whole audience rose at once —almost all of them to hurry to the scene of the catastrophe. My father and Aunt Ben remained but to collect the few articles which their experience had shown to be useful in such emergencies, and the *dramatis personæ* to disencumber themselves of their stage clothes. Even in that moment of distress and alarm, it was not without a sense of humorous absurdity that I found myself a prisoner in the salmon-coloured suit. I could obtain nobody's aid to undo the two buttons behind, and, in that hateful apparel, it was utterly impossible that I could present myself on the cliff terrace at such a time. It would have been a hundred times worse than going to a funeral in hunting costume. At last I procured a knife, and cut it open down the front (just as the Japanese disembowel themselves), and so got out. Then at full speed I followed, and soon passed the rest of the hurrying throng. In the avenue lay Ivanhoe's long palmer's cloak, which poor Cecil had cast off as he ran. I could see his white shirt-sleeves, as he sped along the terrace like a deer, at least half a mile ahead of me. In front of the place where Richard and Ruth Waller usually worked, I could also see a dark knot of men and women—a funereal group which seemed already to speak of death. As I drew nearer, I found these standing around the pit-mouth

in a semicircle, within which, just as I arrived, a man came out from the pit with a barrowful of earth, which he emptied very hastily, and then returned. The faces of all expressed an intense anxiety and grief—not the mere curiosity which is too often the feeling chiefly recognisable in the onlookers at tragic scenes: not one of those present but had had cause to bewail a similar catastrophe on their own account, or on that of their kinsfolk.

"On whom has the pit fallen?" inquired I of one who had already stripped his coat off, in readiness to take his turn at the work within, though he was an old man too.

"On Richard Waller and his sister, sir."

"Good God!" cried I. "What! on Ruth?" I looked round nervously for Cecil, but he had disappeared.

"Yes, indeed, sir; though we trust the lass is not so far in but that she can be reached in time. That little lad there" (pointing to a pale-faced child, who was crying bitterly) "was helping a bit with the barrow, when he heard the fall, and ran out to tell us. It was lucky—if anything can be called lucky in such an affair—that he was there to hear it, or we should not have known what had happened until it was too late."

"Then you think," asked I eagerly, "that it is not too late now?"

"Not for the lass, sir—no; though I fear poor Richard is done for. From what the lad says, I reckon Ruth was only just beyond the props when the sand came down."

"Beyond the props!" cried I, in amazement. "How could that be?"

"Heaven only knows, sir; though I do fear that the drink which has led poor Richard to spend his substance, has at last cost him his life."

"You don't mean to say that Richard Waller sold his

props for drink, when he knew that his sister was to share his risk?" cried I indignantly.

"I know nothing certain, sir, except that drink will make a man sell anything, including, as Parson Bourne says, his own soul; and, at all events, the props are gone, or how could yon have happened?"

Here the barrow-man came out, looking white and exhausted, and was immediately relieved by another hand; and a few minutes afterwards a second man emerged from the pit, for whom another was similarly substituted on the instant. Not a single second was lost. There was a total silence now, the slight commotion caused by the coming up of the party from the Manor-house having ceased. My father was standing in the inner ring of spectators, with a little pile of blankets beside him, and a bottle of brandy; one finger was in his waistcoat-pocket, where, as I well knew, a lancet lay. Aunt Ben stood beside him with a roll of bandages, not crying, as many of the women were, but wearing such an expression of divine pity as made her homely features almost beautiful. Eleanor, who had silently made her way to my side, wore also a calm face, but trembled excessively. Suddenly the man with whom I had already spoken observed coolly, "Your Cousin Cecil digs well, sir; don't he? He's been longer in than any of 'em, and the barrow still comes out as quick as ever."

"Is Cecil in the pit?" asked I in wonder not unmixed with alarm.

"Yes, surely. He came up just as the third turn was called, and dashed in with the spade like a good un. He's used to the work, it seems; but he must be nearly spent by this time."

"What a noble fellow!" ejaculated a sweet, low voice behind me. I turned, and saw Lady Repton: the tenderness of her woman's heart made her fair face woful, and

showed its lines, but I liked it better so than I had ever done before.

"Fred would dig too, if he knew how," said Eleanor, taking, I suppose, her ladyship's observation as a reflection upon my own inactivity, which I am sure it was not intended to be.

"Yes," said I, "I would do so willingly, but I should be a hindrance rather than a help; whereas Cecil—"

Here I stopped abruptly. To tell how Cecil had learned to use the spade, would have been at once to disclose, at least to one of those two, the motive that was now giving such unwonted vigour to his arm. As I thought of that, I looked round for Jane, but she was nowhere to be seen. I felt glad of this, on all accounts, but in the first place, because she would naturally have been much alarmed at her brother's perilous position; for there *was* very considerable peril in it. The spadesman in such cases was, of course, the most advanced of the workers; for though, as he dug, it was the duty of the propper to make all safe behind him, he was by no means unlikely to be caught by a new fall of sand; and especially would this be the case if his anxiety to effect a rescue should make him incautious; and was Cecil likely to be prudent, digging as he was for something that, in his eyes, was dearer far than buried treasure in those of a miser? Every breath that was now lent to him might eke out the scanty stock of it in his beloved Ruth; for the theory of the poor girl's position, based on the firm ground of experience, was this, that if alive at all, if not hopelessly crushed and smothered, she must be in some confined spot, the air of which must needs be speedily exhausted. She had certainly not been killed outright by the first fall—I say first, because there were generally more than one in such cases—since the little boy had heard a muffled cry of

"Help!" from her after the pit had caved in. Perhaps, even now, that cry was ringing in poor Cecil's ears within there! It could not do so much longer, that was certain. I saw old Mr. Bourne take out his great silver watch, ask some question of his son—doubtless as to the time the accident had happened—and then shake his head despondingly: this was followed by a sorrowful murmur from the crowd, as though that expression of the old man's opinion had found an audible echo.

Suddenly a voice was heard within the pit, and every eye began to twinkle with anxiety, every head to crane forward.

"Back, back!" cried my father in authoritative tones; "leave plenty of space round the pit's mouth." As the crowd mechanically obeyed him, the barrow-man came running out without his customary load. "They are coming!" he exclaimed, then took his place in the mass of onlookers.

No one asked *who* were coming; but a party in the back-ground, who had been engaged in forming a couple of litters, or it might be biers, out of fir-poles, now came forward with them; while the blankets were spread out ready for instant use. It was an awful moment: dear Eleanor stole her trembling arm in mine, as if for support; and Lady Repton placed her little hand upon a pitman's shoulder. If a thunderbolt had fallen on the terrace, it would scarcely, I verily believe, have at that moment drawn away our gaze from the cave-mouth, on which all eyes were riveted. The propman had already made his appearance; and now came Cecil, tottering under the weight of a burden scarce more ghastly than himself—the corpse, as it seemed, of beautiful Ruth Waller. Her face, like his, was white and damp; her long black hair trailed over her shoulders, and mixed

with his, and both were clotted with sand. But while his limbs shook beneath him, hers hung down limp and lifeless; and while his laboured breathing could be heard by the most distant spectator, Rue did not seem to breathe at all.

"Next turn!" cried old Mr. Bourne, and instantly the work within the cave commenced again; but for my part I had neither eyes nor ears except for Cecil and Ruth. The thought that Richard Waller had brought this misery on his innocent sister, steeled my heart against him, even in that bitter hour—for which I had afterwards cause for shame.

Ruth was set down on the blankets; and my father knelt down on one side of her, and Aunt Ben on the other, while Cecil, kneeling at her feet, gazed at her shut white face with unspeakable tenderness and agony.

"Hush!" You could hear the wood-pigeon's murmur in the distant firs, and the flow of the far-off river, as my father leaned down his ear and listened for her breathing.

"She lives!" said he, looking up to us with tender gravity.

"Thank God!" ejaculated the rector solemnly.

I am sure that most of us did thank Him. It would have indeed been hard if cruel Death had snatched so fair a form, and laid it in the grave for a bridal bed.

But though not dead, Ruth was quite insensible, or, rather, she knew nothing of what was happening about her, for suddenly she cried out, "A spade, a spade!" doubtless filled with some vague sense of the fate she had so narrowly escaped. It was, of course, not to be thought of that she should be taken to her own cottage, that would presently receive for its only other inmate the dead body of her brother (for although the pitmen in no

way relaxed their efforts to save him, we all felt that *his* case was hopeless); and I saw Aunt Ben whisper to my father, who threw a troubled look towards Cecil. She had doubtless proposed that the poor girl should be taken to the Manor-house.

"The Rectory is nearer," suggested Nelly boldly, yet without venturing to glance in the direction of her grandfather, whose countenance at this proposition began to evince stronger feeling than it had yet shown throughout the whole affair. He was understood to murmur something about the spare bed not being aired.

"She shall have *my* bed," said Nelly; and with that poor Ruth, who had already been laid upon the litter, was about to be borne away.

"Stop!" cried Cecil, speaking for the first time, and laying his hand on the shoulder of the nearest bearer. "That is my place, if you please;" and the man gave way, and he took his place accordingly.

I can see the whole scene now, as though it were before my very eyes—Cecil's grave quickness, and the bearer's stolid wonder; my father's pained surprise, and the amaze and interest of all the rest, so great, that, in spite of the tragedy that was simultaneously taking place, it expressed itself in murmurs; then the little procession slowly moving off with even pace along the noiseless sand, and Eleanor walking by Ruth Waller's side with her cold hand in hers.

CHAPTER X.

Jane Faints.

Not till an hour had elapsed after Ruth's rescue, was her unhappy brother brought forth from the pit that had been his grave. It was evident, from the appearance of the

body, that he had long been a dead man, and we all hoped that the fall which had overwhelmed him had slain him on the spot. This, however, as it turned out, had not been the case. In a day or two, Ruth was sufficiently recovered to narrate the circumstances of the catastrophe, and they were such as amazed and shocked our little community, even more than the event itself.

When her brother and herself went to work as usual on that morning, they had found that, except from a few yards of passage at the entrance, the whole of the props supporting the roof had been removed. The idea that Richard himself had made away with them for the purpose of supplying himself with the means of purchasing drink, was one that had not even occurred to his sister; nor was it afterwards ever suggested to her, since the fact itself seemed abundantly disproved by her evidence, corroborated as it was by that of the little boy, her assistant. Richard Waller had expressed himself with too much vehemence and indignation against the author of the heartless theft, to be suspected of being himself the culprit: his nature was anything but hypocritical; it was, on the contrary, rash and impulsive, as was fatally evidenced by his conduct on the occasion in question; which at the same time convinced us that we had done him wrong in attributing to him a selfish disregard of his sister's safety. "Prop or no prop," he had passionately exclaimed, "I do my work to-day as usual; and if anything happens to me, my blood be on the villain's head that has done this thing! But as for thee, lass," he had added, "keep thou within the props, with the boy."

In vain Ruth had endeavoured to combat this rash resolve. Early as it was, the unhappy man had already partaken of strong liquor, and was in no condition to be argued with, while the theft of the props had excited him

beyond control. All that his poor sister could do was to keep as near to him as possible, in order to give him warning of impending peril, though her doing so angered him exceedingly, and more than once he had driven her back with words that she now trembled to recall. "If Mr. Cecil had only been with me, *as usual*," the poor half-conscious girl had pitifully complained to Nelly (and by that phrase had told her all), "he would have compelled Richard to take heed." She had taken great care, however, to keep the child well within the covered gallery, and given him instructions as to what to do in case of any mischance; which he afterwards most fortunately carried out with promptitude. When the accident occurred, she had her back towards her brother, and was carrying away a basket of sand—poor Rue never used the barrow, because the handling of it spoiled her hands—for the boy to take without, and empty; and the sudden extinction of her brother's candle was the first indication she received of what had happened. Immediately afterwards a dull "thud," as she expressed it, rang in her ears, and she was herself knocked down by the descent of the sand. In neither case, as it seemed, had the sides given way (as is most usual in such calamities), but a portion of the roof itself had fallen in block; the mass that had buried Ruth was partly supported by the basket of sand, beside which she lay; and to its scanty protection she doubtless owed her preservation. Though much bruised by the blow, and greatly oppressed by the superincumbent weight, she did not lose consciousness, and could distinctly hear her brother's pitiful moans. The sand had fallen on him in a wedge-shaped mass, and thereby protracted his sufferings for a brief interval, by allowing him space wherein to breathe. She was so near to him, notwithstanding the dense barrier between them,

that she could even overhear him call to her in muffled tones, and utter the fragments of a prayer. Prone on the damp earth, in total darkness, and with the expectation of instant death, the sound of his voice, she said, shot to her a ray of comfort. She had endeavoured to reply to him, but the sand choked her, while the effort to speak gave her intense pain. "I am a murdered man," she heard him say; and then there was a second and greater fall of earth, "as though the whole cliff had come down upon him." Then all was silent as the grave.

After what seemed an eternity of time, she heard the strokes of the pick and spade; but these, though in reality approaching her, appeared to grow duller and duller, and presently altogether ceased. She had, in fact, become unconscious, and was probably on the very threshold of death, when Cecil's pickaxe let in the air, and revived her. She did not know even now that it was he who had rescued her, nor did she speak of him at all, with the single exception I have mentioned. Her whole thoughts seemed to be fixed on her dead brother, upon the cause of whose sad fate she was incessantly speculating. He had not had an enemy in the world, so far as she knew, and yet she did not need his dying words to be convinced that the theft of the props had been committed of *malice prepense;* that whoever had stolen them counted on his well-known imprudence inducing him to work on as usual, and had thereby compassed his death. What confirmed this view of the case with us all (in spite of our unwillingness to adopt so harsh a theory) was, that the stolen props themselves were discovered in an open space of the wood above the cave, so that they had certainly not been taken for the sake of the few shillings they would have fetched in the "pit" market.

This important question greatly occupied all minds, especially those of the local magistracy, of which old Mr. Bourne and my father were both members. The latter, as I well knew (though he kept silence on the subject), was also full of anxious thought concerning Cecil, whose conduct since the catastrophe was even more significant with respect to Ruth than it had been on the occasion of her rescue. He called at the Rectory twice a day, to inquire how she was progressing; and scoured the country round, in the character of an amateur detective, in hopes to gain some clue that might lead to the discovery of the culprit. Curiously enough, not a word of remonstrance passed his sister's lips, though she could not but have been aware of his proceedings. Perhaps she was rather more reserved and morose in manner than before; but that might have arisen from physical causes, since her indisposition still continued, though not so severely as to confine her to her own room. No one liked to speak of recent events in her presence, because of the share her brother had had in them; and yet we could think of little else. Our theatricals had been put an end to because of them, for Cecil had declined to act; and the gaiety of our little party was utterly quenched. Lord and Lady Repton took their departure on the very day that was to have been witness to the entertainment of the county at the Theatre Royal, Gatcombe; and her ladyship, I verily believe, was more disappointed at the withdrawal of the piece than was its author himself. For my part, my apprehensions upon Cecil's account swallowed up all minor causes of melancholy; the present distress was, I felt only too well convinced, but the prelude to some grave occurrence which was likely to throw no temporary shadow on our homelife. The preparations for the inquest at present gave my father an excuse for si-

lence; he was probably averse to speak to Cecil while the latter was so full of excitement (for Ruth herself was still in a somewhat critical condition); but it was impossible that the *éclaircissement* could be long deferred. What the end of it all would be, it was difficult to guess; but the affair looked gloomy from every point of view for all of us; while as for me, I was only too sensible that any knowledge of Cecil's headstrong attachment was taken for granted, and that for the first time in my life I had grievously displeased my father.

The coroner's inquest took place at Holksham, a small town half way to Monkton, where the magistrates' meeting was wont to be held once a fortnight; and the finding was one which, if not legally justified by the fact, was still only what might have been expected from the heated state of the public mind, greatly aggravated as it was by the excited testimony of Ruth herself. The jury adopted her unfortunate brother's last words, and returned a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." My father was not present; but Cecil and I had attended throughout the proceedings, and the former evinced great satisfaction at the result of the inquiry. "If ever there was a man who deserved hanging," observed he in the drawing-room that evening, with a vehemence that was quite unusual with him, "it was the man who brought the cliff down upon poor Richard Waller." My father quietly combated this opinion. He allowed, of course, that if there had been any intention to do him hurt, the crime was of the deepest dye; but if the props had been merely stolen to make money of them, and considering that nine men out of ten would have desisted from work upon discovery of their loss, he thought the offence could not be stretched so far. We all listened to this controversy in embar-

rassed silence; for we knew what underlay the feelings of both disputants, and had an uneasy apprehension that Ruth's name might presently be mentioned by one of them. Cecil was greatly excited; and, indeed, if that had not been the case, he would not have contended with my father at all, whom he always treated with a respect approaching to reverence. Aunt Ben's fingers trembled so excessively, that she laid down her knitting, and took up a certain *History of the Drama* which had been given to her by Lady Repton. She had religiously tried to get through it during her ladyship's stay; but Cecil had mischievously put back her book-marker daily, so that she always began at the fifteenth page or so, and unconsciously went over the same ground; but on this occasion she did not progress even so much as usual, for she held the volume upside down. Cousin Jane was apparently devoted to her Chinese puzzle; but I noticed that the same piece was retained in her hand, and never put down, with such rapt attention was she listening to what was being said.

"If Richard Waller had not an enemy in the world, my dear Cecil," continued my father, "the *malice prepense* which constitutes 'murder' could not have existed. The verdict, therefore, is evidently incorrect and strained."

"But he might have had an enemy without knowing it," argued Cecil: "there have been cases of that kind before now."

"That is true," said my father gravely; "some men have their worst enemies in those that seem to be dearest to them."

At this, Aunt Ben's book dropped out of her hand. (She afterwards told me it made her so "all of a pug," that, if she had had her knitting-needles, they would certainly have been rusted.) Most happily, however, as

it appeared to us all, Cecil did not reply. The c
sion seemed over for that evening. My father to
Ben Jonson; and Cecil went to the piano, and "p
out" a tune. He was not so good a performer or
instrument as on the flute, but he played fairly and
feeling. After a little, he struck into his favourite
lody, "And ye shall walk in silk attire." It was cu
that he should have chosen it on that occasion, since
moral of the piece in question is certainly oppose
unequal marriages; but perhaps it recommended itse
him on that very account, just as a man who is q
certain of his own logical position is not averse to q
the arguments of his opponents.

In the middle of it, my father laid down his bo
and suddenly exclaimed: "Cecil, I want to speak to yo

My cousin stopped his tune at once, but remain
sitting on the music-stool; while my father stood
with his back to the mantelpiece. We all knew wh
was coming.

"I had intended, my dear boy, to have our talk o
to-night in private, in my study; but, upon secon
thoughts, I think it better to address you in the presen
of those who love you, and whom you love, that the
may add their entreaties—if entreaties should be nece
sary—to mine. I need hardly waste time in askin
you, Cecil, what has unhappily been made of late s
abundantly manifest, whether it is true that you hav
formed a serious attachment to Ruth Waller; and yet
will not take it for granted. Is it true?"

"It is quite true, sir," returned Cecil firmly, and look
ing fixedly in my father's face.

"May I ask how long this has been the case? for i
has been kept from me altogether until within these few
days"—here my father turned a reproachful glance on

me—"a want of confidence which I should not have expected."

"I beseech you, sir, do not be angry with Fred," pleaded Cecil earnestly: "he has only been silent for your sake. He would have told you all, months ago, but for my threat that, if he did so, I would marry Ruth at once, as I most surely would have done. It is I alone who am to blame; not he, nor Ruth."

Here he looked towards his sister half defiantly; and I fully expected to hear her make some contemptuous reply; but she kept silence, her devotion to her puzzle becoming more assiduous than ever.

"Do I understand you to mean, Cecil," continued my father very gravely, "that it is your final resolve to marry this girl?—One moment before you answer. Let me premise that I have no authority over you whatsoever, by your father's will, the use of which could prevent your putting such a scheme into practice; I have no menace to employ of any sort. You are your own master, except as regards money matters; and even in that respect I shall exercise no power to your disadvantage."

I saw Aunt Ben give a glance of remonstrance at my father; and Jane's forehead darken, as she bent lower over her little table; while, on the other hand, Cecil's resolute expression softened—it was still decisive; but the decision was mingled with tenderness.

"You are far too sensible," continued my father, "and I will say also, notwithstanding what you now propose, far too unselfish, not to have set before yourself some of the consequences that must ensue to others in case of your committing this act of—well—imprudence. But I think some have escaped your attention. It has been the endeavour of your aunt and myself to make you feel this house to be your home."

"It has—it has, indeed, sir," interrupted Cecil gently. "I have felt it deeply."

"I am sure you have, my dear lad; but it has not struck you that it can never be the home of Ruth Waller. It has not occurred to you, that in marrying her you will not only give up your *own* position in society—not a great sacrifice, you will say, perhaps: well, you will not think so ten years hence; but it is not worth while to argue that matter—but also that of your sister. I say nothing of the pain and distress that such an alliance must needs cause to my own little household. I am not a man to attach undue importance to birth and station; but I confess—" Here he stopped, and pointed significantly to poor Aunt Ben, who was dissolved in tears. "We shall get over it in time, you think; and perhaps we shall; at all events, we are old; and it is only natural, doubtless, that what concerns your whole future life should have more weight with you than considerations for what may seem to you our temporary convenience. But Jane, remember, is no older than yourself; and let me tell you, that you will be putting her in a most disadvantageous position, as respects her prospects, by allying yourself to this girl. Do not imagine, my dear lad, that I am underrating your temptation. It has well been said, that

> 'The treasures of the deep are not so precious
> As are the concealed comforts of a man
> Locked up in woman's love.'

I use no arguments about thoughtless passion and love's quick satiety, because you will only smile at them. It seems to you, I know, that Beauty will keep her lustrous eyes, and Young Love pine after them for ever; but I appeal to the very heart from which that love (if it be worth anything) upsprings. Do not sacrifice your sister's

prospects for the gratification—I do not say of your own happiness, for you will not be happy, my poor lad—but of your present pleasure."

"How do I sacrifice my sister's prospects, uncle?" inquired Cecil quietly.

"In this way, my boy. All young women naturally look forward to the time when they shall have a home of their own—in other words, to marriage. Jane is not an heiress independent of circumstances; and the fact of your having made an ignoble alliance would without doubt greatly prejudice her future."

"I see," replied Cecil softly.—"Heaven forbid that any act of mine should harm you, Jane!" and here he glanced towards his sister lovingly. "As regards fortune, since our dear uncle has alluded to it, I may tell you that it both was and is my intention to do away, so far as I have power to do so, with the inequality between us in that respect."

He stopped a moment; and for the first time Cousin Jane looked up, and, with a faint smile, seemed to acknowledge his generosity; then shot a glance towards me, to the meaning of which, thanks to Lady Repton, I could not be blind: "I shall be rich, you hear," it seemed to say.

"Every one that knows you, Cecil," struck in my father with tenderness (and indeed it is impossible that his manner throughout could have been more carefully framed to conciliate, and not to wound), "will credit you with generous impulses; but, in the first place, it will not be so easy to do for your sister as you propose, effectually; and secondly, there will still remain the fact, that you, her brother, have married a labourer's daughter, a labourer's sister, a girl with low connections—"

"Pardon me, uncle," interrupted Cecil; "Ruth has no relative, that can be called such, *now*. A few days

ago, I allow, your argument would have had more force. I was not unconscious, as Fred will tell you—indeed, I felt most acutely—that Richard Waller—was a—a grievous obstacle, in short, to my own selfish views; though, Heaven knows, I wished him no harm; he is dead, poor fellow! and that obstacle has been removed." He stopped again, and in the silence we heard the front-door bell violently ring. "As for Ruth herself, sir, you do not know her; she is not the dull village girl that you imagine her to be. Perhaps a day will come when you will not only confess as much, but even not be ashamed to receive her, as others will, I am persuaded, as my wife, and as a true lady, though not so by birth. Lady Repton, as I have heard, sir, was not born a lady."

"My dear lad," said my father, "these are dreams."

"Still, I live in them, and cannot live without them," answered Cecil softly, and yet with a certain dignity, that to me at least seemed very touching. "I am most grieved to oppose myself to you, whom I respect and honour, and whom I would lay down my life to serve; but Ruth is dearer to me than my life."

His fingers, which still rested on the keys, seemed mechanically to produce the last verse of the song he had been playing:

> "And ere I'm found to break my faith,
> I'll lay me down and dee."

My father looked very grave, and was about again to speak, when the door opened, and the parlour-maid entered hurriedly.

"O sir, please, sir," said she nervously, "there's somebody wants to see you."

"I can see nobody just now," was my father's stern answer; indeed, I had never heard him speak so harshly,

his manner to all his servants being always gentle in the extreme.

"But, please, sir, it's most particular," urged the girl, frightened by her master's manner, but still more frightened, as it seemed, by the intelligence she had to communicate.

"Let him come to-morrow morning; or, if you know his business, state it."

"Well, sir—O dear! O dear!—it's the parish constable, and he's been and found the murderer!"

We jumped up from our seats—all, that is, save one of us: Cousin Jane fell back in hers with a sharp shrill cry, and fainted away.

CHAPTER XI.

The Magistrates' Meeting.

It is one of the disadvantages of being studiously reticent and undemonstrative, that when the feelings *do* get the better of such persons, they are apt to exhibit themselves in some abnormal condition far more unpleasant and astonishing than are the usual tokens of surprise or woe. A man who never shares a grief becomes dyspeptic, and goes mad; a woman who never sheds a tear, has fits; and thus it happened to Cousin Jane, though it was only a fainting-fit. Not a word had she spoken throughout that discussion between my father and Cecil, notwithstanding that she herself had partly formed the subject of it, and had even been indirectly appealed to. Not a sign had she given of interest in the man whose terrible fate had precipitated the discovery of Cecil's "love affair." She had hidden every trace of feeling, save that in place of working as usual at the Chinese puzzle, she had stuck in the middle of it, like an automaton chess-player out of repair; and thus, when

the news that Martha brought, "He's been and found the murderer," fell suddenly on her ear, her nerves, unnaturally braced, had fairly given way, and total prostration followed. I saw her face, as Cecil leaped to her aid, and anything more ghastly it was impossible to imagine. If the parlour-maid had opened the door with, "Please, sir, the murderer," and introduced some gentleman dripping with gore, the sensation, so far as Cousin Jane was concerned, could not have been more complete or stupendous. She was carried up, unconscious, to her room; and the shock, acting, doubtless, on a system enfeebled by recent indisposition, affected her very seriously. We did not see her again for days. Aunt Ben, on the other hand, impressionable and sympathetic by nature with respect to all "her own belongings," as she called them, and by no means philosophic even as regarded human affairs in general, bore Martha's piece of news with reasonable composure, though she admitted that the communication of it had "given her a turn." It was, however, the circumstances under which the news had arrived, perhaps—late at night, and when our minds were curiously enough engaged on a subject so closely connected with it—rather than the news itself that was startling, or even strange. That the man who had removed the props from the sand-pit should, sooner or later, be found out, was only what might have been expected; and now that he *was* found, he had not even the ordinary attraction of a detected villain, for it was only poor half-witted "Batty" after all.

As the village idiot had already been convicted of a similar offence, it might naturally have been supposed that all eyes would at once have turned upon him with suspicion in the present instance; but this had not been case. That some had charged him with the crime,

was true; but he had denied the fact with a characteristic irritation that seemed to have the force of truth, and his simple, inoffensive nature had been too well understood for him to become the object of general suspicion. If the props had been taken for gain, it would have been another matter; but poor Batty was certainly not the man to have removed the props for mere mischief, even though he might not have realised to himself the peril of such a proceeding. There was another reason, too, why he should have escaped, at all events, the scrutiny of the coroner's inquest, in the absence of any positive proof of his guilt: it was commonly believed that he was a natural son of old Mr. Bourne. The Alchemist's reputation was by no means unsullied as a man of gallantry, though he did not look like a Belmour or a Lothario. Though so eminently sagacious (after his fashion), he was, in fact, credited with a weakness for the fair sex up to rather an advanced period of life; with being very "human," if not "humane;" and I fear that village scandal did not in this matter do him wrong. At all events, since this great man had chosen in his wisdom to utterly neglect Batty from the cradle (or whatever had been his cheap substitute for that commodity), it was obviously not for his dependents, the village folk, to bring the poor fellow into prominence on the present occasion. After his denial, therefore, of the offence in question, which had besides been never laid seriously to his charge, Batty had been left unmolested, and, perhaps, would not have been farther troubled about it, but for his own act. When the verdict of Wilful Murder, however, was being discussed in the village alehouse in his presence, a sense of the importance which would accrue to the culprit seemed to strike him forcibly, and he had made frank and full confession.

"I took the props away," said the poor creature; "and now I shall be taken to London town and hanged;" an idea that evidently gave him the greatest satisfaction. He would see the metropolis (as he erroneously imagined), at all events, and would probably become a great public character, which—locally—he undoubtedly did. The village constable had, on his part, taken him up, with as deep a conviction of the greatness of his charge, as the official who conveyed the seven bishops to the Tower could possibly have experienced; and had then come down to the Manor-house, as I have said, to report his exploit—to mention himself, as it were, conspicuously, in his own despatches.

Except upon Mr. Bourne's account, it was clearly a matter of congratulation that the offence was thus brought home to one to whom it could certainly not be imputed as a crime; and my father, who was a man who shut his ears to all scandals, had, at first, not even that alloy to his satisfaction. But on that very night, late as it was, the Alchemist made his appearance, and was closeted with him in the study for more than an hour, a fact which raised many eyebrows and loosened many tongues. It was remembered that on the last occasion of Batty's getting into trouble, it was Mr. Bourne, from his place on the magistrates' bench, who had pooh-poohed the inquiry; and, though generally a harsh administrator of justice, had caused the prisoner to be dismissed with a light reprimand; and the purpose of his present untimely visit was unhesitatingly set down to his wish to induce my father to "burke" inquiry into the present business. It was even reported that he had offered to restore the Manor lands to the House of Wray, if he would cause the matter to be hushed up—a proposition most unlikely to be made by such a man, and one which, if made,

would undoubtedly have resulted in his being instantly turned out of the house. He would, indeed, I am persuaded, as soon have dared to ask Aunt Ben's virgin hand in marriage. Certain it is, however, that what he did say turned my father's contempt for the old man into disgust. His age had hitherto protected him from his satire, which subsequently it failed to do; and never shall I forget, when, some time afterwards, the old fellow was chuckling over his acquisition of some gain in stock or share like a male witch, the form which my father's congratulation took. "You are fortunate still," said he, in the words of Middleton:

> "The very screch-owl lights upon your shoulder,
> And woos you like a pigeon."

The result of the interview was, in the end, not without its bearing upon my own fortunes, when it came to Mr. Bourne's turn to influence them; but, for the present, it ended in the complete discomfiture of that worthy.

The ensuing day happened to be that appointed for one of the fortnightly magistrates' meetings at Holksham, and at it Batty was arraigned accordingly before a bench of three. Both Cecil and myself accompanied my father, and were "accommodated with seats" on that imaginary elevation—for, as a matter of fact, each justice had a wooden chair—while the little court-house was crammed to the utmost by all Gatcombe. On account of the locality wherein the offence had been committed, my father was not, as usual, elected chairman (a most fortunate circumstance, as it afterwards turned out); and the same reason disqualifying Mr. Bourne, the dignity was conferred on Mr. Close, Frank's father; an excellent divine, but one not altogether adapted by nature for the performance of magisterial functions. He was very deaf, and very fussy; and if the degrees of human intelligence should

be expressed by the ten digits, progressively, that of the Rev. F. Close, J.P., would have been represented by the figure 2, at highest. Poor Batty's, however, stood only at $^1/_2$ or so, and he quailed before that important and awe-inspiring man as a mouse before an owl. Weeping and wringing his hands, he pitifully expressed his contrition for his offence even before it had been formally laid to his charge; while, dividing the public attention with him, old Mr. Bourne, on the seat remotest from our little party, drooped his shaggy eyebrows and bit his nails. It may be imagined, therefore, that the whole scene contained elements of dramatic interest, and for my part I could not help reflecting how excellently it might be adapted for the stage.

"Hum, ha!" said the chairman, regarding Batty with a solemn shake of his white head. "What is the prisoner's name, policeman?"

Now, this question, simple as it seemed, was not an easy one for anybody to answer, and totally beyond the power of the person interrogated.

"Well, your worship, it's just 'Batty,'" returned the constable, in hesitating accents; and indeed the poor fellow had never been known, save in the parish register, where, I suppose, he had been entered under his matronymic, by any other name. Everybody looked at old Mr. Bourne, and one or two (far back in the crowd) even began to snigger.

"Hum, ha!" reiterated the chairman, his face and bald head becoming red as a new-born infant with the sudden recollection of the *scandalum magnatum* against his brother-magistrate. "Very good; proceed with the charge." Whereupon Batty having pleaded "Not guilty," the village constable had his innings, and detailed the circumstances of the prisoner's capture and confession

with painstaking circumlocution, and reiterated expressions of hope that his evidence might give pleasure to their worships.

"Are you sure now, policeman," inquired the chairman sternly, "that this acknowledgment of the prisoner's guilt that you have detailed to us was made of his own free-will, and after due warning had been given to him, that whatever he said might subsequently be used against him?"

"Lor bless your worship," replied the constable, looking towards Batty with a pitying smile, "he couldn't have understood nothin' o' that—not he."

"I don't ask you whether the prisoner would have understood you, sir," exclaimed the chairman irascibly; "I ask whether you gave him due legal admonishment?"

Mr. Bourne nodded approval in reply to the sweeping glance of triumph at his own sagacity that here emanated from the Chair, and a murmur of applause arose from the spectators.

"Justice Close knows how to tackle a fellow, mind ye, when it comes to law," was an opinion uttered in my hearing, and received with marks of general adhesion. The constable's air, of late so impressively suggestive of having done his country a good turn, now became quite chop-fallen.

"Well, no, your worship; I can't say as I did."

"Did what, sir?" inquired the inexorable chairman. "Let us hear the whole truth."

"Well, I didn't give him no due—whatever your worship pleased to call it—my old woman and me, we only gave him his supper."

A roar of laughter followed this announcement, in which poor Batty joined tumultuously. He thought that everything was now good-humouredly arranged, and made

an attempt to get out of his box, which had to be frustrated by physical force.

"It seems to me, Mr. Chairman," observed Mr. Bourne, in a husky voice, "that the evidence we have just heard, having been illegally extracted by the constable, on the prisoner's own confession, is quite worthless, and cannot be used against the accused at all."

"What, what? Then what the deuce is to be done?" returned the chairman in a whisper. "Can't dismiss the case, you know; that's impossible."

"Why not?" answered the old man in the same low tones; "there's no case to go on with."

"No case! Why, I'm come here on purpose; pooh, pooh.—What do *you* say, Mr. Wray?"

My father shrugged his shoulders: he knew well enough what should be done, I saw, but he did not wish to take any leading part in the affair. "Ask the clerk," said he curtly.

Now the magistrates' clerk at Holksham (as in one or two other country seats of justice in these isles) was in fact the sole authority from which all judgments of the bench were derived; but the fiction was always kept up among the Great Unpaid of his being the mere amanuensis and recorder of their legal decisions. To "ask the clerk" was therefore an impossible suggestion, and one which caused the Rev. Mr. Close to frown and shake his head; but he bent down over the table, and held a consultation with that functionary in a low tone, the peculiarity of which was that all the signs of gesture-language were reversed in it, so that to the eyes of the spectators it appeared as if the clerk were humbly putting his interrogatories, and the chairman blandly but firmly laying down the law. It was really a very clever performance on the part of his worship, and got him great credit; but it was

even a still cleverer on the part of the clerk, since it got him not only credit, but insured the continuance of a salary of some hundreds a year.

"Let those witnesses be summoned," observed the chairman, speaking aloud, and with great dignity, "upon whose information the constable was induced to arrest the prisoner."

At this there was a slight commotion in the crowd, as though two or three persons were making a hurried exit; and when the constable had indicated who the proposed witnesses were, it was discovered that they were not in court; for to be connected with a great public event in its first stage—such as picking up a man who has been run over by a Hansom-cab, or running for the fire-escape when we see flames—is often very gratifying; whereas some subsequent development of the affair—such as an inquest, or an action at law by an insurance company—may cause us a good deal of trouble, if it does not seriously compromise us.

Thus, in the skittle-ground of the Red Lion, it had doubtless been very pleasant to detect a wilful murderer; but it was not at all pleasant to have to prove the fact on oath before the Holksham bench, and then to be "bound over," perhaps, to do it again before the still more impressive majesty of the judges of assize. The constable's self-important airs had persuaded his informers that all responsibility had been shifted to his official shoulders, and now that they found themselves about to share it, they had turned and fled. The getting up of criminal cases, as may be inferred, was not an art brought to perfection at Holksham.

The witnesses having in vain been summoned, the proceedings came once more to a dead-lock; and again

Mr. Bourne remonstrated with "the chair" against the case being proceeded with.

"But we are not proceeding, Mr. Bourne," argued the unhappy chairman; "we are waiting for evidence."

"You may do as you please, Mr. Chairman," answered the old man, raising his voice, "but it will be at your own risk. I am not at all sure that the prisoner may not have grounds for bringing an action against us for false imprisonment. He has pleaded, 'Not guilty,' and nothing has been brought forward—"

"Please, your worships," here exclaimed one of the constables in charge of Batty, "the prisoner is a-telling us as how he did it."

"What do you mean?" ejaculated the chairman incredulously, yet welcoming any solution of the difficulty in which he found himself involved. "He's not saying he is guilty, is he?"

"I did it, I did it!" here broke out poor Batty, wearied with the tediousness of the proceedings, and thoroughly disenchanted of the attractions of a public position. "I stole the props, and made the cave fall in. There, there! Now let's be off to London."

It was a pitiful sight to behold the witless, friendless lad (he was not much over twenty, and looked younger) turning from one to the other of those who stood about him, and pleading to be taken away. Even old Mr. Bourne had for once the sympathies of his hearers with him, when he pointed out to the chairman the absurdity of pursuing so serious a charge against one who had manifestly shown himself an irresponsible agent.

"But there's a man been killed," urged Mr. Close; "and here's the fellow that did it, and *says* he did it."

"That's just the point, my good sir. This unfortunate

lad will say anything, because, as everybody is aware, he does not know what he says."

"Well, well, you know more about him than I do, Mr. Bourne: that is," stammered the chairman, "you ought to do so; I mean, because he belongs to your parish. But we who sit here have nothing to do with previous acquaintance with an accused person—What do *you* say, Mr. Wray?"

"If you ask my opinion," said my father gravely, "I must needs say that, since we have this poor fellow before us protesting that he committed the offence with which he is charged, I see no other alternative than to send him for trial. A judge and a jury are as competent to perceive his irresponsibility as ourselves. Indeed, we have no power, as it seems to me, to deal with the matter otherwise."

The chairman looked towards the clerk, who, with obsequious face, seemed to reply: "Just as you please, sir; you are the best judge;" but I caught in his deferential whisper the words: "Your only course," and "the Home Secretary;" and then Mr. Close's answer: "The devil it is: then that settles it."

Then the chairman blew his nose, like a trumpeter proclaiming silence, settled his spectacles, that had been disturbed by that operation, and addressed Batty in solemn tones.

"Prisoner at the bar, you stand committed."

"I didn't commit it," roared Batty; "I was set on to do it. I was given money to do it."

"Set on to do it! money!" ejaculated Mr. Close.

"Yes, money," repeated Batty in a grudging tone. "I knew I shouldn't be allowed to keep it—I never am; I have got it in the waistband of my breeches. They've taken away my knife, or I would let you see the gold."

"He *has* got money, your worship," said the constable, rapidly investigating the repository thus indicated, "though I'm sure I searched him through and through. Here are five golden sovereigns."

If Batty had suddenly announced himself in possession of his five wits, and had laid them for inspection on the magistrates' table, they could not have excited greater wonderment than did the exhibition of this wealth. That Batty should have been in possession of such a sum was indeed as astonishing as though a vein of gold should have suddenly been come upon in the sand-cliff; a few shillings was the very most the poor fellow had ever had to call his own in his life; indeed, as a general rule, he did not earn sufficient to support himself, his scanty wages being supplemented by charity and parish relief.

"Where did you get this gold from, Batty?" said my father gravely; his magisterial functions utterly lost sight of for the moment, in the interest which this unexpected turn had given to the case. If this poor lad had really been bribed to remove the props, there was murder in the matter with a vengeance; but of course it seemed more probable that he had stolen the gold. That was the view, also, which even Batty understood his audience to entertain, for he replied at once: "It's my own money; it was given me for taking away the props."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Cecil in my ear. "Did you ever hear anything so horrible! Perhaps poor Richard was right, after all, when he said: 'I am a murdered man.'"

"When was it given to you, and by whom?" continued my father kindly. "You will not be punished for speaking the truth, you know."

"It was given to me last Thursday; I remember that, because I got my dinner up at the Manor-house just be-

fore. They're always good to me up there." There was a simple gratefulness in Batty's tone that touched one, but a curious sort of apologetic hesitation also; and he cast a wistful look at his interrogator, as much as to say, "Do you really wish me to tell?"

"It was on Thursday, was it?" said my father. "Well, and now tell us who it was who gave you these five sovereigns to take away the props from Richard Waller's pit."

It was a calm summer day, and though the court-house windows were all open, not a breeze was stirring; the drowsy crow of a cock alone broke the hush without, and within was unbroken silence. Every eye was fixed on Batty, and every ear was stretched to catch his answer. He hesitated, glanced nervously in our direction, and then, nodding towards my cousin, as though in unwilling recognition of him, answered simply: "It was Mr. Cecil, yonder."

CHAPTER XII.

Committed for Trial.

THE sensation produced by Batty's amazing statement on all who heard it was profound. The silence which had preceded it was broken by a confused murmur of astonishment, and then, once more, there was not a sound. All eyes had turned from Batty to Cecil, including those of my father and myself. I knew, of course, that the charge was absurd and false; but I looked to him to reply to it, just as if, had some senseless fellow struck at him in brutal jest, I should have expected to see him ward off the blow. But since there he sat so pale and speechless, I could not choose but strike in for him in my passion, notwithstanding that his accuser was but a poor natural, with: "You vagabond liar—"

"Hush, sir!" interposed my father sternly. "It is not for *you* to speak."

"Thank you, Fred," whispered my cousin; "thanks, my friend;" and then, with one deep sigh, he seemed to rouse himself from his stupor, and spoke aloud in his own clear tones. "You are mistaken, Batty," said he. "Look at me again, and be quite sure."

If Cecil's silence had been prejudicial to him in the opinion of the crowd, his voice and manner ought now to have redeemed it. In place of indignation at the hateful charge that had been brought against him, they only evinced gentleness and pity, though his face testified to the anguish he suffered from this random shaft, that had pierced to his inmost heart, where lay Ruth's image.

"Yes, yes; it was Mr. Cecil," returned Batty peevishly, but without looking my cousin in the face. "I know him well enough. He has given me money often."

"Silver and copper," said Cecil, still speaking in the same calm tone; "but surely not gold, my good fellow."

"Only once gold—the real red gold," persisted Batty; "but I was to do something for that, and I did do it; and now"—here he looked at his confiscated coins with pitiful yearning—"they have taken it all away. O dear, O dear!"

"Come, come; none of this drivelling," observed the chairman angrily. He was a thorough gentleman at heart, and felt keenly for his brother magistrate, whose nephew he was well convinced had in reality no more to do with the affair than he had himself.

"The best way will be to let the poor fellow tell his story his own way," whispered my father.

"Well, if you don't *mind*," returned Mr. Close; "but it seems to me the fellow is mad.—What do you say, Mr. Bourne?"

"Whether mad or not," returned the old gentleman coldly, "he is not more mad than he was five minutes ago, I suppose, when you were so bent on taking his evidence. But if Mr. Wray wishes to stop the proceedings, I for one do not wish to feed public scandal, whatever others may have done in similar cases."

My father flushed from brow to chin at this malicious speech, but uttered not a word; and, when Mr. Close glanced towards him in a helpless sort of way, only bent his head towards Batty.

"The bench wishes to hear all you have got to say, prisoner," said the chairman, acting on this hint. "If Mr. Cecil did give you this money, how and when did it happen?"

"It was on the Thursday, I tell you," said Batty, "when I got the cold beef and pudding at the Manor-house."

"Was it at the Manor-house that the money was given to you, or elsewhere?"

"Eh?" inquired Batty vacantly.

"What the deuce is to be done?" muttered the chairman; "all this is but so much waste of time."

"I think the word 'elsewhere' has puzzled him, your worship," murmured the obsequious clerk.

"Well, put the question to him yourself then," said Mr. Close testily. "I am not used to talk with a fool."

With a smile that perhaps veiled the thought, "I *am*," the clerk obeyed.

"Did Mr. Cecil Wray give you this gold at the Manor-house?"

"No; in the fir-wood above Wayford, where I took my pudding to eat it."

"About what time was that?"

"Why, at dinner-time of course."

A roar of laughter burst forth from the crowd at this undesigned sally. It was not the opportuneness of the reply that provoked their mirth, but that readiness to seize upon anything facetious which is always manifested under circumstances of serious import, which gives piquancy to the small jest of the judge upon the bench, and to the unintentional *mot* in the parson's sermon; it put Batty, however, who took it as a compliment to his epigrammatic powers, in high good-humour.

"And the pudding was good, was it?" continued the clerk.

"It had plums in it," returned the other triumphantly. "But even the plums were not so good as the guineas that Mr. Cecil brought me. 'There,' said he, 'is enough to buy you fifty puddings;' and I *would* ha' bought 'em, and eat 'em too, if you'd ha' let 'em bide wi' me."

"And what were you to do for the guineas?"

"Well, I was to go into Waller's pit that night, and take away the props, he said. And so I did.—There, now, I have done wi' it." And with the air of a man who has at last got free from his responsibilities, the poor natural made once more an attempt to leave his place of durance.

Frustrated again in that endeavour, he turned sulky, and refused to answer any more questions. The magistrates' clerk tried all his Machiavellian arts on him in vain; and, indeed, I don't believe the rack would have constrained Batty to speak a word, when in one of his morose moods.

"Is there anybody in court," at last exclaimed the chairman wearily, "who can throw any light upon this strange affair?"

I would have spoken long ago had not my father's

rebuff forbidden me to do so; and I had only been waiting for an invitation of this kind to take advantage of it.

"I wish to be sworn, may it please your worships," said I, stepping down from the little platform. My father looked surprised, but said nothing; and old Bourne favoured me with one of his ugliest looks, as I got into the witness-box.

"Administer the oath," said the chairman, with eyebrows raised to their full height. I think he was under the impression that matters had at last come to a climax, and that I was about to say that it was I who had killed Richard Waller after all. "Now, tell us, in Heaven's name, what *you* know about this matter, young gentleman."

"I know nothing, sir," said I, "about the taking away the props; but I can prove that the prisoner's story, so far as my cousin Cecil is concerned, is utterly false. On Thursday last—the date on which he is accused of having paid over this money—he was absent from Gatcombe, and in my company, at Monkton, the entire day."

A murmur of applause broke forth in court, which was immediately hushed, when old Mr. Bourne was seen about to speak.

"What you say is true, Mr. Frederick Wray, I have no doubt," said he coldly; "but the prisoner may be right in the fact, though wrong in the date."

Then ensued a scene such as the townhall at Holksham had never before witnessed, even in the tumult of an election time. My father, though years ago, as I have said, he had lost his seat for the county, had always been personally popular; the natural interest excited by the charge so unexpectedly brought against his relative had been largely mixed with sympathy upon his own account; and now that Cecil had been apparently exonerated from blame, that this old miser, whom everybody despised or

fiend, should seem still to hold him guilty, raised public indignation to the uttermost. I had never before heard that peculiar "yah, yah," of an English mob, in which contempt and hate find such acid but forcible expression; and I looked with wonder at the transformation of that tossing throng, most of whom were labourers in the sand-cliff, and well known to me, but who now, as they yelled and shook their fists against their common enemy, as though they would have torn his heart out, had suddenly become unrecognisable. In the social world, perhaps, as in the physical, though all without appears so safe and solid, there is but a thin layer that hides from view the central fire.

I am bound to say that old Mr. Bourne showed himself no coward, but sat in his place looking down in grim silence upon the tumult, while my father rose and denounced it. It seemed to be his business to do so rather than that of the chairman, since the disorder had its origin partly on his own account; and he did it with a fire and energy for which few would have given him credit. It was necessary, as he afterwards apologetically explained, to speak in the Cambyses vein, when there were only two policemen to back the voice of authority against five hundred rebels; and, at all events, he reëstablished comparative calm, during which the proceedings were concluded.

Batty was committed for trial. It was impossible that any other course could have been taken, since, though the details of his confession—to which he had stuck with as great tenacity as to the main fact—had been disproved, there was his possession of those five golden pieces to be accounted for, which, as the chairman ventured to observe without consultation with his familiar, if they had not been given him for the purpose he had stated, "had been

certainly come by by some dishonest means, which it was for a judge and jury to investigate and determine."

Though not unconscious of the want of logic in Mr. Close's reasoning, I felt, for my own part, that the contents of poor Batty's waistband were indeed very strong corroborative evidence of his guilt; and as for his story, notwithstanding that I had exposed its falsity with my own lips, I was well convinced that it was, at least, no fiction; not only was the poor lad utterly incapable of having invented it; he evidently believed that it was true. Such a tale might have been the delusion of a madman, but not of a poor natural such as Batty; and again, there was the gold.

After the first moment of his being so unexpectedly called upon in his own defence, Cecil had never lost his calm collected look, which had, however, an inexpressible sadness in it, as of one who had made up his mind to suffer much. As we drove home together, both my father and I endeavoured to cheer him, not by avoiding the subject which monopolised his mind, but by speculating on the strange fancy that had taken possession of Batty. That it was weird and baseless as a dream, would have been easy to prove in any case, but the fortunate circumstance of his having given a false date to the supposed occurrence, had, we argued, removed from it all aspect of seriousness. It did not become a man of sense to be disturbed about such a matter, and so forth. But my cousin only shook his head, and held his hand up, as though in rejection of all comfort.

"But, my dear Cecil," said I, well understanding upon whose account he was so distressed, "this charge against you of all men, is not only absurd, but monstrous, by reason of your well-known personal regard for the Wallers."

"Yes," returned he gloomily, "but suppose it should

be also well known that only last night I termed poor Richard 'an obstacle,' and was in a manner congratulating myself upon his 'removal.'"

"Nobody but an Old Bailey counsel could make anything of that, I think, Cecil," observed my father cheerfully; "and even as for the murder, as it is called, it remains to be proved such."

"I believe it *was* a murder," returned my cousin gravely. "I believe Batty told the truth about the matter, so far as he was capable of understanding it."

My father did not reply. I think he thought so too, as I did.

"But, if Batty was really bribed," urged I, "the intention of him who bribed him must have been doubly criminal, since the removal of the props not only jeopardised the life it destroyed, but that of Ruth also."

Cecil shuddered.

"Well," said I, "it was you who saved her life; can any reasonable being suppose it was also you who wished to kill her?"

"That is well put," said my father. "Fred shall be brought up to the law.

'Adieu, Celestial Muse, adieu!
Shakespeare no more, thy silvan son,
Nor all the art of Addison,
Pope's heaven-strung lyre, nor Waller's ease,
Nor Milton's mighty self must please.
The visage wan, the purblind sight,
The toil by day, the lamp at night,
The tedious forms, the solemn prate,
The pert dispute, the dull debate,
The drowsy bench, the babbling hall,
For thee, Old Bailey, welcome all.'"

Unselfishness was as much a characteristic of my father, as the quoting from ancient authors, and I felt that though doing his best to arouse Cecil from his gloom, he was himself much disturbed in mind. The malicious

conduct of old Mr. Bourne during the late inquiry had vexed him; and he was still more annoyed with himself at being vexed at anything such a man could do. Moreover, he detested publicity: *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo* might have been his motto, though he was neither proud nor unsympathetic; and now, it was only too probable that our family name would be in everybody's mouth for some time to come.

We brought home with us, of course, the contagion of our melancholy; and nobody would have recognised that night in our little party the same which had been so gay, and bent on gaiety, scarce a week ago. Cousin Jane did not make her appearance, but her brother visited her in her room, and I understood that she had received his news with her accustomed philosophy. She treated Batty's story with great contempt, and as being a fabrication from beginning to end.

"Depend upon it," she said, "there is nobody to blame in the matter but the fool himself, who is not without a method in his madness. If he had been well whipped on the first occasion when he stole the props (as he ought to have been), he would never have done it again."

For the moment, Cecil, accustomed to defer to the opinions of his sister, was a little comforted; but on his asking her how she accounted for Batty's possession of the gold, her reply, though by no means without sagacity, was less satisfactory.

"Why, he stole it, of course, as he stole the props," said she; "and thus endeavours to excuse himself from two charges (one of them by anticipation), by one and the same story. If I had been chairman of the magistrates' bench, instead of Mr. Justice Shallow, I would have dealt with the matter summarily enough."

Which I believed she would have done, and most devoutly wished she had.

Poor Aunt Ben, on the other hand, was utterly demoralised by what had happened, and constantly dissolved in tears. She already beheld Cecil in the clutches of the law, out of which she was by no means of opinion that innocence always emerged triumphant.

"They will swear anything," she sobbed, "those lawyers" (whose position she vaguely confused with that of witnesses for the prosecution); "and the cleverest of them are somehow always on the wrong side."

"But, my dear aunt," urged I, "there is no sane person who even hints at Cecil being concerned in the matter."

"I hope not, Frederick; I should like to see them at it," returned she indignantly. "The dear boy is, of course, as innocent as a lamb; and even if he wasn't," added she, throwing her arms about his neck and bursting into tears, "his old Aunt Ben would love him all the same."

Her naïveté did not even raise a smile among us. Cecil was far too wretched to be moved to mirth, and beside our common distress upon his account, my father and myself had each our own trouble. The events of the day, among other disagreeables, had left, he felt, a breach between the Manor-house and the rectory: my father hated quarrels with his neighbours, and had hitherto always steered clear of them; and as for me, though I neither had nor could have any quarrel with Eleanor, it was only too probable that I should be from henceforth debarred from her society. Late in the evening, however, the Rector came down to us accompanied by his daughter, and expressed himself in a very frank and generous fashion. I had no idea that in so dull and pompous a

personage there could have existed so much manly feeling; it had always seemed to me that there was not stuff enough in the Rev. John Bourne to make a gentleman, but I had been mistaken.

Without any undutiful reference to his father's unfriendly conduct towards us at the trial, of which he had probably received an exaggerated account, he gave us to understand that the report of it had annoyed and distressed him exceedingly.

Aunt Ben, however, received him with great stiffness (it is the women who perpetuate, even when they do not make, our family vendettas), and very soon left the room, on pretence of looking after Jane.

Cecil had withdrawn himself when the door-bell had announced the arrival of visitors.

"I am sorry not to see my friend and pupil," said the Rector warmly. "I regret beyond measure that he should have been exposed to this wicked slander, and especially that any relative of mine should have acted otherwise than to have put his foot upon it, and stamped it out as soon as named."

My father was deeply moved, and I think as much taken by surprise by this generous behaviour as myself.

"Mr. Bourne," he said, "did but do his duty as a magistrate, though he certainly might have evinced a more neighbourly feeling. His expression was that the prisoner might have been right in the fact, though incorrect in the date."

"It is impossible that he could have been right in the fact," observed the Rector vehemently.

"As to Cecil, of course," returned my father. "What Mr. Bourne doubtless meant to add was, that the statement was also incorrect as to the person."

"You are most kind to say so," said the Rector;

"that is certainly what he ought to have said, and what I hope he will make a point of saying in public upon the first opportunity. It is in my opinion only what he owes to your nephew."

My father bowed stiffly, with a grave smile. The idea of any public explanation of old Mr. Bourne's being required to set his kinsman right in the eyes of the world seemed unpleasantly absurd.

"Can I see Cecil himself?" asked the Rector hesitatingly.

"Go and fetch him, Fred," said my father.

I left the room, but waited in the hall for Eleanor, who, I guessed, would follow me, under pretence of seeing Jane. It was evident that the two gentlemen wished to be alone, perhaps in order to speak of Batty.

"How shocking all this is!" cried she, bursting into tears for the first time. "Poor, poor Cecil!"

"My dear Nelly," said I, comforting her in lovers' fashion, "you need not take it so to heart; it is only a nine days' wonder after all. The assizes will have been held by that time, and the real criminal have doubtless got his deserts."

"Then you think there *is* a criminal, do you, Fred?" asked she with a frightened air.

"I do," said I gravely; "Batty could never have invented such a story. That he was bribed to take those props by somebody, I have hardly a doubt."

"That is what Ruth says. I had hoped that she took a prejudiced view of the matter, on account of the words she heard her poor brother say—those last terrible words, that are always haunting her."

I shook my head. "It is useless to deceive ourselves, dear Nelly; there is a great mystery about this sad mat-

ter, which has not its beginning in poor Batty. How did Ruth take the news of to-day's doings?"

"That is what I wanted to see you about, dear Fred. When she first heard of that wicked attempt to implicate Cecil, I thought she would have broken her heart. She begged and prayed of me to send for him at once, but I dared not do it; and presently my grandfather came in —and—and—there has been a quarrel between him and your father, and he spoke very bitterly against the family, and especially against Cecil, in Ruth's presence, just as though he had really been the guilty person; and Ruth spoke up for him to his face—who could blame her for it?—and he bade her leave the house at once, and she is gone."

"Good heavens! gone whither?"

"I do not know. I was not allowed to speak with her. Grandpapa is so hard, you know."

Here I heard the drawing-room bell ring, and knowing that it was for Cecil, we parted hastily. I ran up to my cousin's room, but it was empty. I called: "Cecil, Cecil!" at the top of my voice, but there was no reply. I looked at my watch; it was nearly eleven o'clock. Then I went downstairs, and learnt from Martha that my cousin had left the house immediately after Mr. Bourne and Miss Eleanor had arrived. Whither could he have gone at such a time of night, and on what errand? A cold despair crept to my heart, as the thought flashed upon me: "Suppose he should have gone away for good?" What a terrible misnomer would that "for good" be, had he really fled with Batty's ghastly accusation hanging over him!

CHAPTER XIII.

A ghostly Walk.

"WHERE is Cecil?" asked my father impatiently, as I reëntered the drawing-room. "I hope he does not refuse to see Mr. Bourne."

"It is not that," said I. "He is not to be found. He has left the house."

"Left the house!" repeated both my father and the Rector; and they looked at one another with the same thought in their minds, as I could well perceive, which had already occurred to myself.

"But where is he gone to? Has he left no message? Have you no idea, Fred, what has become of him?" There was not only perplexity in my father's tones, but positive alarm.

"There is only one place that I can think of," replied I with hesitation; "he may have gone to Wayford."

"I trust not, indeed," observed the Rector hastily. "Ruth Waller has gone home to her cottage. It would be a most improper proceeding."

"Go and see, Fred," said my father gravely. Impropriety had become, it was evident, a secondary consideration in his eyes. "Tell the servants that they may retire. I will sit up for you myself."

"Had *you* not better go, or *I*, and bring him back?" suggested the Rector.

"No," said my father curtly. "I rely upon Fred's judgment and strength of character."

This was gratifying, and more especially so since I knew that my father had hitherto been not well pleased by my conduct with respect to Cecil and the girl; but I must say I did not welcome the responsibility. If Ruth had been a ward in Chancery, and I had been furnished

with a decree of that high court, launched against her contumacious swain, I should have had my doubts of the success of my enterprise; but as it was, what arguments had I to use beside those which had already proved fruitless? What hold had I upon him? I was well acquainted with my cousin's impulsive character, and a double source of apprehension now possessed me; it suddenly struck me that they had gone off *together*. Cecil was always plentifully supplied with money; and finding this beautiful creature alone, and in distress, I could easily imagine that, blinded by passion, and eager to escape from a locality which recent events had rendered hateful to him—but no; I could not wrong him thus, even in thought; it would be time enough to think ill of my friend when he had proved himself in fault. The next minute, I had snatched my cap from its peg, and was on the moonlit road.

I ran at that swift but steady pace that is meant to last, and which admits of the mind communing with itself as well as of taking impressions from without; and in order to avoid the risk of meeting any one who might inquire my errand (though this was not likely, for our folks at Gatcombe kept very early hours), I took the terrace way. Not a sound but that of my own panting breath disturbed the midnight silence. Nature, asleep, lay stretched before me for many a mile, in all her loveliness, lit up by the pale light of the moon. Each field and farm stood out distinct and clear, most recognisable, yet not familiar; for a landscape, under such circumstances, resembles its own self at noonday only as some fair virgin, newly dead, resembles herself in life. The brightness and the glory are fled, but a spiritual beauty, born of calm and peace, reigns in their place. Alas, thought I, how soon the parallel ends; for the world will wake to

life and light again, while the beauty of the dead will fade and change to unutterable horrors. Then, with a flash, my errant thought reverted to Richard Waller and his terrible fate, the scene of which I was approaching. It was more than a mile ahead; but the hearselike canopy of firs that overhung it was distinctly visible, looking blacker even than it was wont to do by daylight. My lonely path had already led me by many a gaping cave which had proved, at one time or another, the sepulchre of a living man; but with such catastrophes I had been only acquainted by report. The Wayford pit, which I had to pass on my road to Ruth's cottage, had given up its dead before my own eyes. A vague terror suddenly beset me, and shook my knees as I ran on. Should I once stop even for a moment, I felt that it would have overcome me utterly. My nerves were naturally strong enough, but the events of the last few days had unstrung them; and perhaps I had cultivated my imagination somewhat to the neglect of my reasoning powers. At all events, I felt a strong inclination to descend the sand-cliff at once, and take the lower road. On the other hand, though there was none to see me, I experienced a sense of shame at such a proceeding. I debated the matter with myself, thought arguing with thought within me, as it was often wont to do. The case is not uncommon, perhaps, with those who have lived long without companions of their own age; but it is no sign of a healthy mental condition. Had my father, at my age, been in my place, he would, I know, have given way to no such weakness for an instant, and that idea gave me courage. The Wrays had never been given to fear of any sort; my uncle had been bold to audacity; even Aunt Ben would have approached yonder wood, if duty had called her so to do, as fearlessly as she would have

gone to her garden. Was I, then, to be the first coward of my race? I ran on at increased speed. Perhaps it was *that* which caused my heart to beat so loudly that I could hear it as I reached the pine-wood. The white terrace was flooded with the moonlight, and made the grove intensely black. A whisper ran through its dark plumes, which I had heard a thousand times, but it had never said, "Hush, hush! the dead is here," as it did now.

In the front of each cave was a little covered hut in which the scythe-stones were wont sometimes to be roughly chipped, before they were taken home to undergo the more delicate operations. I had often seen Richard Waller sitting in the one to which I was now drawing near, and heard his shrill yearning cough—and I heard it *now*. Yes, with the sweat-drops on my forehead, with every vein in my body filled to bursting, and my heart beating like a steam-engine, I stopped and listened to it now. It was full a minute before the sound was repeated, and then I recognised it for what it really was, the creaking of a tree-top in some breeze of the upper air. I blushed from chin to brow as I thought how my father, with his faith in my "strength of character," would have blushed for me, and then walked resolutely on. I no longer ran; I was resolved to punish myself for having given way to such abject weakness. I would not even avert my eyes from the pit-mouth as I passed by, nor did I. The hut I have spoken of had hitherto had its back towards me, but I came now into full view of it; and, horror of horrors! there sat in it a human figure, huddled up and cramped together, just as I had seen that of Richard Waller when he was taken dead out of the cave—the head was dropped upon the hands, and the elbows resting on the knees; and "Hush, hush! the dead is here," said the trees again.

In my last experience, I thought I had undergone all that fear could inflict, but I had been mistaken; that had been but panic, whereas this was veritable terror, unspeakable, unimaginable, and yet a thousand times intensified by the imagination. The self-same sight that Eliphaz, the Temanite, beheld in his dream, seemed now to be before me in reality; and "the hair of my flesh stood up," like his, and my bones shook. If the Thing had moved or cried out, I verily believe my wits would have fled for ever, if not my life; but it remained quite still, and I, as still, stood staring at it. I cannot express the relief to my mind, and also my grateful sense of that relief, when the fact was presently made apparent to me that it was no ghost, but my cousin Cecil. He might have been dead himself, however, for any sign of life he gave; and, remembering my own terrors, I took care to make no sudden exclamation, but called him by his name in a low voice. As it turned out, however, I need have taken no such precaution, for he answered, "Yes, it is I," in a sad and unconcerned voice, with neither start nor expression of astonishment at seeing me.

"My father sent me for you," said I; "he is distressed and alarmed at your absence, and so are we all."

"Ah," replied he wearily, "it is late, I suppose. I will come home."

"But, my dear Cecil," said I, approaching him, and taking his hand, which was very hot and feverish, "why are you here at all at such a time?"

"Why not?" said he. "Is it not said that murderers have an irrepressible desire to revisit the scene of their crimes?"

"But you are not Richard Waller's murderer," said I soothingly.

"No," answered he firmly; "but I desire above all things to meet with the man who was."

"You are not serious, Cecil, or if so, you are not yourself," observed I gravely.

"No, that is true," he answered. Then, with a deep sigh, but with all his old kindliness of tone, he added, "Ah, Fred, this day has done for your friend and kinsman; my life is going out altogether: in this foul breath of report, it can no more exist than can a candle-flame in a damp cave."

"The breath of a fool," said I, "is of less account than the breeze among those firs. How can you take such rubbish to heart?"

"Nay, Batty spoke the truth in the main, Fred," answered my cousin solemnly. "It is useless to discredit him. Even Rue thinks that."

"Have you seen her since—since the magistrates' meeting?"

"Yes; just now: she parted from me here not half an hour ago. I called at the rectory to see her; but Mr. Bourne had turned her out of doors, for disbelieving that I had tried to kill her brother, and she had gone home. She is at the cottage yonder, all alone."

"And you followed her thither?"

"Yes," said he, observing, perhaps, some dryness in the tone of the inquiry. "What then?"

"Nothing, my dear Cecil, only, since you seem so nervously sensitive to the ravings of a poor natural, it surprises me that you should have exposed yourself and Ruth, by such an act of imprudence, to be talked about by the whole village."

"I was obliged to see her, Fred; I was indeed. But I did not stay beneath her roof; perhaps I dared not; at all events, I brought her here—here, where her brother

was murdered but a week ago, and where she herself, by a miracle, was saved from death. It is not a spot, you will allow, for love-passages. Yet, here we first plighted troth." He looked about him in a pitiful sad way, as though the girl herself had been dead, and only her memory associated with the scene. "Well, she loves me still, notwithstanding what Batty has said; and I verily believe, had I pressed her to do so, would have fled with me this very night."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I did not doubt that in the least, for, indeed, I did not. My heart, perhaps, was somewhat hardened against the girl who had been the cause of so much trouble to us all; and, moreover, though my cousin was so dear in my own eyes, I did not think him one likely to have inspired a disinterested affection in those of Ruth. I nodded gravely, and he went on.

"She loves me dearly, Fred, and I believe for my own sake," said he piteously, as though perceiving my thought. "And I, O, I never loved her as now, when we are parted perhaps for ever!"

He sat down again on the bench, from which he had risen in his passionate excitement, and buried his face in his hands.

"Parted for ever?" repeated I, in wondering tones.

"Of course," said he simply. "How can it be otherwise, whilst this monstrous charge hangs over me; and who can tell if it will ever be removed? Do you suppose that while this shadow of suspicion lingers, that I would marry Richard Waller's sister; and it may linger long, perhaps for ever! If poor Batty sticks to his story, as I think he will do, this horrible affair, whether he be right or wrong, may remain a mystery for ever; and if it does, so help me heaven——But there, I have already sworn it

to her on this spot, where the blood of her brother cries out for vengeance. I will drag out my days alone; for I *am* alone when Rue is absent."

To one who did not know my cousin, or only saw in him a youth of twenty, impulsive, and perplexed by grievous trouble, these would have seemed but wild and wandering words; but to me they were both sad and serious. If the cloud that hung over Richard Waller's fate should never be dispelled by the rays of truth, I felt that it was only too likely to darken Cecil's life for many a day; but, on the other hand, it seemed almost certain that it would be dispelled. Few cases that are sifted in a criminal court leave much that is unaccountable behind, and I had good hope of the coming trial not only putting Cecil's innocence beyond a doubt—for that was within my own power to do—but of fixing the crime upon the real offender.

"My dear Cecil," said I assuringly, "in two days' time, you will, I both hope and believe, be wholly free from these forebodings; you are cheerless and dispirited now, as you well may be. This spot itself, with its melancholy associations, is sufficient to depress anybody's spirits. Let us come home. My father told me that he should sit up for us."

"I am sorry he is doing that," said Cecil, rising, and immediately moving homewards, "and very sorry, believe me, to be giving trouble and sorrow to those from whom I have received such unmerited kindness. It is very poor repayment, Fred."

"My dear Cecil," interrupted I, "such words, I am sure, would distress my father much more than any trouble you may have caused him from a matter beyond your own control; for we know that Love is such, which

'Rushes on one like a mighty stream,
And bears one in a moment far from shore.'

I have heard my father himself repeat those lines as though he had once experienced what he had quoted, and yet he calls himself a philosopher. You might say with his favourite Chamberlayne—

'Is't a sin to be
Born high, that robs me of my liberty?'

or ask, with Massinger, why

'Riches, with other men
Esteemed a blessing, is to you a curse?'

We may differ from our friend in the choice of the object of his affections, but it would be folly to blame him. We do not do that even when love is unrequited."

"At all events we should not," said Cecil gravely; "and yet when women place their love where it is not reciprocated, they are both blamed and scorned."

"Not by those whose blame or scorn is worth a farthing," said I, pleased to win my companion, even for a little, from his private grief; "for women's love is, after all, a more engrossing passion than ours.

'Poor love is lost in men's capacious minds,
In theirs it fills up all the room it finds."

You must excuse my old tags and scraps, Cecil," said I, laughing; "you know that I have learned that 'damnable trick of iteration' from my father."

"I know it," said my cousin, sighing; "and you have learned much else that is better of him also. Ah, Fred, of us two cousins, though I have heard myself called the more fortunate, it was you who were to be envied, and not I, even before this blow fell on me. To have had such a father as you have, is a better lot than to have inherited all the wealth of the Indies!—But we were talking of unrequited love in woman—is your modesty,

Fred, so great, that you are unaware that you yourself are the object of such affection?"

I knew at once that my cousin was referring to his sister, though certainly, had it not been for Lady Repton, I should not have known it. But how in honour could I confess it?

"I assure you," said I, laughing, "that the lady in question, whoever she may be, has never breathed one word of her misplaced passion in *my* ear."

"Because she knows it would be useless," returned he quietly. "I could not have blamed you for your preference for Eleanor, even if you had not known and loved her before you saw my sister. Jane is too much like myself to inspire love."

"You have no right to speak of any woman in that way, Cecil, when discussing such a subject," observed I coldly, "not even of your own sister."

"Why not?" said he simply, "when she knows it as well as I, and when nothing can give her hope, or alter what is fated. You can never be her lover, Fred; but if anything should happen to me, you must take my place as her brother, so far as you can. It has not been less painful to me, dear Fred, to broach this matter than for you to hear it spoken of. I have been cognisant of the fact for months, though you, lost in your Eleanor, may have been blind to it. One owes a woman something for her love, even if one cannot repay it in kind. Come, promise me to repay Jane, if ever it should be necessary, with your care and protection."

"Most certainly, my dear Cecil, I will promise that," said I: "our common relationship, setting aside my affection for yourself, would dictate no less."

"Thanks, Fred, thanks." He pressed my hand, and walked on more quickly, as if relieved of some burden;

my idea was then that he was thinking of his sister's comparatively friendless condition, in case he should marry Ruth, and Jane should refuse to sanction the alliance; but perhaps he alluded to the still more complete separation of Death.

"That you do not like Jane for her own sake," he added presently, as though in continuation of some line of thought he had been pursuing in the mean time, "I can only too easily imagine. I believe I am the only person in the world that does; I ought to do so, for there is no sacrifice, I verily believe, which she would not make for my benefit, or for what she considers to be such."

"You are right there," said I, eager to join in any genuine commendation of one in whom I felt but a languid interest, and even that not of a favourable sort. "The whole world, to Jane, seems to be comprehended in yourself. She watches you as a mother her child, or as a bride her husband, with eyes of loving duty; and when you speak, she hangs on your words as though they were honey, and she a bee."

"Then you think she loves me dearly?" asked Cecil, looking up with animation.

"Of course she does; who can doubt it?" asked I, surprised.

"No one, no one," returned he. "But you are wrong if you think she has no ambitions of her own, even beside that unhappy one of which we have been speaking, and which never can be gratified. Poor Jane, poor Jane!"

Here we turned into the avenue, and caught for the first time the gleam of the lamp in my father's study, a sight which made us quicken our pace to a rate that was incompatible with farther talk.

CHAPTER XIV.

Jane and I.

THOUGH my father looked very grave when he opened the front-door for us, it was plain that he was relieved to see us. "Good-night, Fred," said he, in signification that I should retire, and beckoned Cecil into his study; my cousin wrung my hand as we parted, as much as to say: "Whatever happens, I will take care that my offence shall not be any cause of breach between you and him;" and I have no doubt he did his best to exonerate me from all blame; as for himself, it was clear to me he had thoroughly made up his mind as to his own course of conduct, however it might pain him to oppose himself to my father's wishes.

As I passed by Aunt Ben's boudoir, the door softly opened, and Cousin Jane appeared, fully dressed.

"Hush!" said she, holding up her finger, as though in fear of some exclamation of astonishment escaping me. "Will you come in here and speak to me for a minute?"

I obeyed at once, though hardly less surprised than I had been an hour ago to find her brother sitting on Richard Waller's bench. Of course, I thought she had long retired to rest, and certainly she looked like one who was quite unfitted to be out of her bed. A ghastly pallor sat on her features, and beneath her eyes were great black rims.

"My dear Jane," said I, really shocked by this change in her appearance, which I felt was not so much caused by bodily indisposition as by anxiety on her brother's account, "this is no time for you to be up, I'm sure: you will make yourself downright ill."

"What matters?" returned she scornfully. Then, in

quieter tones, she added: "I cannot rest for thinking of Cecil. That is my only ailment. You can cure it."

"Your brother is come home," said I, "all right. He is now with my father in the study."

"And the girl?" inquired she eagerly. "Where is she?"

"The girl!" repeated I. "Do you mean Ruth Waller?"

"Who else *should* I mean?" returned she impatiently. "She has left the rectory: where has she gone to?"

"I believe to her own cottage."

"Did you find her there?"

"No; I did not go to Wayford, at least not to the village. I found Cecil on the sand-cliff just above it. It was a great relief to me, as you may imagine."

"Why?"

The question staggered me not a little. She had asked it peremptorily, like one who is really in a doubt that he wishes solved.

"Why, because it would have been such a dreadful thing if I had not found him. If he had fled away from Gatcombe, for instance."

"It would have been the best thing in the world," answered she; "that is, if they had fled together; for then he would not have married her."

The vehemence of her manner, contrasted with the low tone in which she compelled herself to speak, was terrible; it seemed the very concentration of rage.

"You look shocked," continued she, with contempt. "You are thinking of her, and not of him; you have pity for her because she is pretty. I have no pity, except for him."

"So it seems," said I coldly.

"It *is*," answered she fiercely. "You men are all as soft as wax, unless, indeed, when you have your

own purposes to serve. Some people who are very tender are very cunning."

There was something in her manner which reminded me of her behaviour on the occasion of Cecil's accident; her words: "When he is dead, you will be satisfied," seemed once more to ring in my ears.

"I may be cunning, Jane," said I stiffly, "but I cannot understand you."

"I know it," said she, her voice changing to quite a plaintive tone. "Don't be vexed with me, if, remembering that you had helped Cecil to this girl, I spoke in bitterness."

"But I did not help him to her, Jane," was my quiet reply.

"You could have hindered him if you chose, Frederick. He made you his confidant. You could have told him what she was, and what she will be. Your tongue can be sharp enough when you please."

"But I knew nothing against Ruth's character, Jane," pleaded I; "and as to her position and belongings, Cecil was as well aware of them as I."

"You knew nothing!" repeated she, with contemptuous mimicry. "You thought this drunken drab an angel, without doubt, as he did himself. I tell you I would rather see him dead before my eyes, than married to her. Such women should be whipped and put in the stocks."

"For being beautiful?" said I. I spoke with bitterness, but not with any design to affront my cousin personally. My consternation, therefore, was excessive when, with a sharp and sudden cry, she hid her face in her hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

"My dear Jane," said I soothingly, "what is the meaning of all this? I can easily imagine that you are much annoyed with Cecil's choice. It annoys and distresses us

all. But certainly there is no good to be done by vilifying the object of it. I have done my best—indeed, I have—to dissuade him from his purpose, and will continue to do so; but if you, or any one, were to speak of her as you have done to me, within his hearing, it would have the very contrary effect to that you wish. I do not like Ruth myself; but you move me to be her defender. She is an honest girl enough in her way, and some day you will be sorry for having said such things."

"*I* sorry?"

"Yes. For if your brother should marry her—and I honestly tell you I think he will—it will be the wisest, and indeed the only course for us all to make the best of it."

"Your father did not say that to-night," sobbed Jane hysterically. It was the first time that I had ever seen her in tears.

"No; because he draws, of course, the gloomiest picture of the prospect for Cecil's eyes, while it is still prospect; but much as your brother's marriage would distress him, it would not wound him so deeply as that at which you have hinted would have done, supposing Cecil had been capable of such conduct. You said I looked shocked—well, I felt shocked, that you should wish your brother had committed a baseness."

"Ah, you do not know what love is, Frederick, though you may think you do."

"Nay," said I, smiling, "that is just what Cecil would tell *you*. In your devotion to him, it is true you would cheerfully sacrifice another; but he has sacrificed *himself*, remember."

"Not yet, Frederick, surely not yet?" she pleaded passionately. "Do you mean to say there is *no* hope?"

"In my opinion, very little, Jane."

"But there is *some*," urged she; "I can see it in your

face. You have never been cruel to me, Fred; at least not designedly. I beseech you, for mercy's sake, to tell me wherein that hope lies?"

In spite of the anger which her harshness had stirred within me, I was moved by her plaintive earnestness, which had also something of personal tenderness in it, not perhaps displeasing to my vanity.

"Well, there is just one thing, Jane, which may prevent your brother's marriage with Ruth; yet that, alas! is what none of us can desire to happen."

"What is it?" asked Jane impatiently. "What *can* it be except his death?"

"His dishonour, or what he fancies to be such. While this mystery still hangs over Richard Waller's death, Cecil will certainly not marry Ruth; and perhaps it may hang for ever."

"That is just possible," observed Jane thoughtfully: "it is a peculiarity of such idiots as this Batty, I have heard, to adhere with obstinacy to their delusions. Let us hope it will be so in this case."

"I must differ from you there again, Jane," said I gravely. "If you had heard your brother speak of the matter to-night, you would hope anything rather than that the weight of this groundless charge should not be shifted to the right shoulders. It oppresses his very soul; he is not like the same man; nor will he ever be himself, in my opinion, while he bears it."

"How strange," said Jane, with a cold smile, "that the shadow of a shadow should have such power! A drunken fellow, whose death, it seems, is a relief to everybody, is smothered in a sand-heap. A village idiot confesses that he was the cause of the accident, as he had already been of a similar mischance. Nothing appears simpler, or, I must say, more in accordance with the fit-

ness of things. But because this natural gets it into his addled pate that a young gentleman gave him money thus to act—on a certain day, too, when it is proved that the thing could not possibly have occurred—there is all this trouble and pother!"

"Still," said I, "a verdict of wilful murder is a serious thing; and whoever bribed Batty to remove those props was an accessory before the fact."

"If he *was* bribed, perhaps it may be so; but who can suppose such a story to be true?"

"*I* do," said I quietly; "and what is of more consequence, Cecil does. If the blood of Richard Waller were really on his hands, he could hardly feel the matter more poignantly. It makes him shrink even from Ruth herself; and, as I have already told you, that result will be dearly purchased at the cost of his peace of mind. My hope is, however, that, at the trial next week, Batty will either withdraw his statement, or that his possession of the money may be accounted for in some other manner. In the mean time, I am most thankful on all accounts that Cecil has returned."

"Well, you are wiser than I," said Jane cheerfully; "and if *you* are pleased, I suppose that *I* ought to be. I have kept you from your bed, when you were doubtless tired, and troubled you with many questions, besides inflicting on you my own views, which are wicked, it seems, as well as mistaken. Forgive me, cousin, and good-night."

I took her hand, which was cold and damp as usual.

"Do not fret, Jane," said I. "In a few days' time, your brother's mind will doubtless be set at ease, and he may then be more amenable to reason. At present, if I were you, I would venture with him neither on argument nor persuasion."

She nodded assent; and I left her standing by the

table, rigid as a statue. As I closed the door, and while the handle was still in my fingers, I heard a heavy fall. I reëntered quickly, but without noise, fully expecting to see her stretched on the floor. But she had only dropped into her seat, with her elbows on the table, and her face buried in her hands—the very image of wretchedness and despair. She was evidently quite unconscious of my presence, and I withdrew at once with precipitation. Perhaps I had misjudged Jane, after all. Underneath that icy exterior, a heart might be beating full of sympathy, which was all the deeper, because it ran in a single channel. I could not believe that such emotion was produced by the thought of her brother's *mésalliance;* it must needs be therefore on account of the charge which had been brought against him; her endeavours to make light of it had been characteristic. She felt the disgrace and shame as bitterly as he did himself, but was too proud to own it.

At that moment I heard the study-door shut, and then voices in the hall.

"God bless you, sir!" I heard Cecil say, in broken tones, so like his sister's had been once that night, when she had shed tears, that I could have thought them to be the very same.

"And God bless *you*, my lad!" returned my father tenderly. "A few days hence, and you will laugh at these forebodings. Come, come, Cecil; be a man."

CHAPTER XV.

What the "Top" said.

If the progress of civilisation is to be measured, as many would have it, by the number of newspaper readers, we were not in a very advanced stage of it at Gatcombe Manor. My father, indeed, was wont to divide the world

into two classes—those who believed in the newspapers and those who did not; and I am afraid the former class were in his eyes identical with the fools, and the latter with the wise men. That excellent weekly local journal, the *Mangel Wurzel News*, without which no Conservative breakfast-table could be said to be complete upon a Saturday, was, in fact, the only newspaper we took in; and it was therefore a great surprise to us, on the morning after the events I have just described, to find in our letter-bag the *Sandylandshire Turnip Top*, a newspaper whose circulation, in Gatcombe at least, had been hitherto confined to the rectory. It was the county Radical organ, and was supposed to advocate "advanced opinions;" the difference between it and its rival consisting, however, mainly in the fact, that the former was in favour of the parvenu gentry of the neighbourhood, and the latter of the old county families. The *Top* (as it was irreverently termed by its opponents) was always asking, for instance, how long the infamous hereditary principle was to exclude such a man as John Bourne of Gatcombe from the list of deputy-lieutenants for Sandylandshire. For the Alchemist had money in every good investment that offered, and the *Top* was a very thriving concern. My father, who was no more a Tory than he was an ichthyosaurus, used to chuckle over this particular grievance, and to aver that it caused him to have a better opinion of the "hereditary principle" than any argument he had seen advanced in its favour; but Aunt Ben, who was *Mangel Wurzel* (or True Blue) to the backbone, would have had the *Top* burned in the market-place by the common hangman, if market-places and common hangmen had been articles on hand.

"Why, good gracious, Frederick, here's the *Top!*" cried she in horror, taking the unclean thing from the

letter-bag, and holding it between her finger and thumb. "Who could have sent it to us? Pah, pah! it should be thrown into the kitchen fire."

"Let it be fumigated," said my father gravely, "but not burned. It may perhaps have an account of our theatricals in it, and a criticism upon *Ivanhoe*."

"Not *it*," said Aunt Ben scornfully; "and besides, that would have been in last week's paper, if at all."

But the idea of being in print, even in the *Top*, fired all my soul, and I snatched at the paper with trembling fingers, and put it in my pocket. A natural instinct suggested an adverse verdict, and I did not wish to let the public mark my agonies while the barb worked in my soul. It is said that one of the most trying experiences in connection with a literary career is one's first review —the first notice taken in a public print of one's novel or poem; but I am inclined to think that the ordeal is even still more severe in the case of a dramatic aspirant; for he who writes a drama, writes for the public only, and cannot comfort himself with the fond delusion that if a failure on the stage, his work will be perused by private persons. In the case of a novel, if the critics (confound them!) do band themselves together to decry it, there is still an appeal to Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Brown: whatever its artistic short-coming, it may still have its attractions, and secure success in despite of the hebdomadal arbiters of fame; but when a play is condemned upon the boards, it is not only hopeless to imagine that it will be read in the closet, but no advantage even if it is. I felt that if *Ivanhoe* was damned in the *Top*, the term would have all the significance that it has in theology.

I had fortunately eaten my breakfast, for otherwise a piece of toast would have now choked me, and at once retired to my own room. Then I took the newspaper

out, and looked at it still folded; gazed forebodingly at its frontispiece, the Banner of Freedom, which protruded itself on either side of the wrapper, and felt as though Fame, Fortune, Fate—my Future, in fact, whether for good or ill—were all inscribed within that (sixpenny) roll. The idea, of course, was absurd, the position ludicrous; but it was no joke to me. And looking back upon that incident after the experience of a lifetime, I must allow there was at least as much cause for gravity as in many another juncture of affairs which has hinged on an equally imaginary pivot. It is not the most grave matters that concern us the most seriously, but those which most nearly affect our *amour propre*.

The *Mangel Wurzel News* in its last week's issue had informed its readers, under the unpromising head of "Miscellaneous," that "At Gatcombe Manor, the seat of Frederick Wray, Esq., a dramatic entertainment, at which Lady Repton (once the famous *tragédienne* of the London boards) had kindly assisted, had been given to the tenantry of the estate;" surely a most unsatisfactory and insufficient notice of that great event; and if the *Turnip Top* should now show itself alive to the future interests of the British drama, I was quite prepared to discard a foolish prejudice, and take the editor—and his principles, too, if necessary—to my beating heart. How it did beat, and how sick I felt, it is quite impossible to depict in words. And all the time the *Top* contained not one single syllable about the matter. But I anticipate.

While I still turned over the fateful journal in my hands, entered Cousin Cecil, smiling. "Well, Fred, what does it say? What! have you not opened it?"

"No," said I. "Don't laugh at me, please; but open it yourself, and tell me."

"My *dear* Fred," returned he, in a tone of remon-

strance (but then it was not *his* play), "why, what *does* it matter?"

He sat down, crossing his legs unconcernedly, and tore the paper open with irreverent fingers.

"Under what head will it be, Fred?—'The Drama'? or 'Gatcombe'? or 'Accidents and Offences'? Eh? I don't see a word about it." Suddenly his roving eyes were arrested, and an expression of intense interest came over his features.

"Have you found it, Cecil? Don't read it to yourself. Pray, let me hear it" (for I saw it was no good news). "Whatever it is, I can bear it from your lips."

"Listen, then," answered my cousin, with a mocking laugh that made my blood freeze. "It is not a paragraph that I am about to read you, but a leading article—the first in the paper; the one that everybody must needs read. Some kind friend has, however, marked it with two crosses, so that we should not miss it."

"Beast!" observed I parenthetically. "But what is it called?"

"'*Gross Miscarriage of Justice.*—It is our painful duty to comment upon certain proceedings before the magistrates' bench at Holksham, a detailed account of which will be found in another portion of our paper. They illustrate so completely the evils attendant upon that system of subservience to the lords of the soil which it has always been our proudest mission to expose, that we cannot forbear to dwell upon them, unwilling as we are to wound the feelings of a family, which, notwithstanding it has already contained one notable *mauvais sujet*'" ["That is my father, I suppose," interpolated Cecil bitterly], "'has been hitherto widely respected. It would be affectation to conceal the name; we refer to the Wrays of Gatcombe. A coroner's jury brought in

last week a verdict of Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown. The next day, one of the culprits gave himself up to justice, and yesterday repeated in open court the confession which he had already made, somewhat informally, as it appears, to the constable who arrested him. So far the case seems clear; nor would there, we apprehend, have been the slightest difficulty in the matter, but for the social position of *another person* implicated in the prisoner's statement. True, it is averred that the culprit in custody is of weak intellect; but even if it be so, it is hard to see how his words should be permitted to weigh against himself, and yet lose their force when directed against his (alleged) accomplice. He charges Mr. Cecil Wray of Gatcombe (son of the late Thomas Wray, of whose conduct the Liberal party had such bitter cause to complain at the time when this county first threw off the yoke of Tory servitude) with direct participation in the crime of which he confesses himself to be guilty; declares that he was bribed by him to steal the props, the removal of which caused the sand-pit to fall in upon Richard Waller, and produces the very gold which (as he alleges) was paid him for that purpose. Far be it from us to press harder on this young gentleman than the case demands; let us be careful to add that in one particular, the date, Mr. Cecil Wray was able to disprove this statement. But with that exception, it must surely be admitted that the case is a strong one —far too strong to be readily discarded from the minds of honest men, even though summarily dismissed by the county magnates sitting in judgment at Holksham—one of whom, shameful to narrate, was no other than the uncle of the young gentleman thus implicated. We put it to our readers, whether, if Bill Styles or Thomas Noakes had been the persons pointed out as his accomplices by

the unhappy prisoner at the bar, *they* would have been suffered to leave the court, not without a stain, indeed (for the stain of blood will remain where it has been indicated till this matter has undergone a thorough investigation), but without measures being taken to insure their subsequent attendance if required. One voice, indeed, that of Mr. Bourne of Gatcombe, was raised from the bench itself on behalf of evenhanded justice; but it was overborne; the principle of family influence triumphed, and Mr. Cecil Wray is still at large. Of course, it is possible that he may abide at home, in readiness to meet the renewal of this grave charge at the assizes, or elsewhere. But it would be a dereliction of our public duty not to point out that he may also remove himself from the jurisdiction of the law, if he so pleases; and also to remind our readers that it would not be the first time that a member of the proud race of Wray has similarly eluded justice."

"What does this man mean by that?" inquired Cecil sternly.

He saw I hesitated.

"For Heaven's sake, tell me, Fred. There is nothing left me now to hear which can make life more bitter."

"It is, I suppose," said I, "a cruel and exaggerated reference to some election trouble with which your father was concerned. All this is mere venom, my dear Cecil, which has doubtless been rankling in this blackguard's mind for years. Perhaps my uncle horsewhipped him twenty years ago; and I'll do it again myself before he is three days older."

"No, no," said Cecil sadly. "You can never horsewhip *this* away, dear Fred;" then suddenly casting down the paper: "Great Heaven!" cried he despondingly, "what have I done to have earned punishment such as this!"

"Dear Cecil," said I, "don't give way thus. What *does* it matter (as you yourself just said to me) if a toad-like thing, such as the *Top*, *does* spit its venom? No one who knows you, or it, will be affected by such rubbish. And besides, as I heard my father say to you last night, a few days hence, and, in all probability, the truth will be known, and we shall laugh at all these slanders."

"I feel as if I should never laugh again," groaned Cecil. "Hush!" He started to his feet, then added hastily, "That is your father's step. Put away the paper, lest his noble heart should suffer hurt from that base weapon."

However stricken and past farther harm poor Cecil felt, as far he was himself concerned, he could still feel for others.

"Well, Fred, what does the critic of the *Top* say?" inquired my father cheerily. "To judge from your looks, the infidel dog has damned your *Ivanhoe*."

It was touching in him (knowing, as I did, how he despised such matters) to have come to inquire how the paper had handled my poor play.

"They have not mentioned it at all, sir," said I ruefully enough.

"Tut, tut! That *is* bad, Fred. Still they might have abused it (for the *Top* does not love our family); and not to be famous is better, after all, than to be infamous; is it not, Cecil?"

This unlucky question, and its direct appeal, was too much for my unhappy cousin; he strove to reply, but could not, then burst into tears.

"It is Cecil who has been wounded by what the paper says, and all of us through him," said I, in answer to my father's inquiring look. "There is a scandalous article against the Wrays, founded upon Batty's state-

ment before the bench. I think you had better not read it, sir."

"My dear Fred," said my father with a look of quiet scorn, "have you known me all these years to such little purpose as to suppose anything written in a newspaper could move *me!* Let me read what this able editor has written about us. *He* sees the necessity of his living, remember, though it may not impress us with the same force."

"Don't read it, sir, O, pray, don't read it!" pleaded Cecil passionately; "nobody who reads it can ever think well of me again."

The hand which Cecil warningly interposed, my father took, and tenderly retained throughout the perusal of the article; when he had read it, he quietly ejaculated, "Hang him, Rook!" which was his favourite quotation when annoyed with any one, and put the paper into his pocket. "What does Suckling say about such fellows?" murmured he, musing.

> " 'Thou vermin Slander, bred in abject mind
> Of thoughts impure, by vile tongues animate,
> Canker of our prized Freedom, couldst thou find
> Naught but our love whereon to show thy hate?'

This strikes through you at us, my lad, else we should not feel it; and what you suffer, remember, is the measure of our hurt; so, for our sakes, wear a bold front. Neither your sister nor your Aunt Ben must read this rubbish. Light a match, and burn it, Fred."

Then laying his broad palm on Cecil's head, just as though he had been a child, and patting it encouragingly, my father left the room, wounded, as I believe, to the very quick; for his philosophy was reserved for his own affairs: in what concerned those who were dear to him—whether dead or alive—he was only too sensitive.

CHAPTER XVI.

Batty makes no sign.

THE pleasure of inflicting pain on others, even though they be not our enemies, is not unhappily confined to the breast of the British schoolboy. It exists more or less in all low human natures, though (with the doubtful exception of the kitten who has caught a mouse) not, I believe, among the brutes. To whose good offices we were indebted for that copy of the *Turnip Top*, we never knew, but several kind female friends were good enough that very day to call and condole with Aunt Ben upon its "abominable" contents. They were distressed above measure at the disgraceful attack upon her respected family; and while confessing that the insult was beneath contempt, very solicitous that "something should be done."

"Perhaps you had better make your kind suggestion to my brother," was Aunt Ben's grim reply, at which these well-meaning ladies gathered up their skirts and retired precipitately. If my aunt suffered, she did so, like the North American Indian at the stake, without moving a muscle.

"I always told you, Fred, what the *Turnip Top* was like," observed she calmly.

Nor, strange to say, did Cousin Jane give any outward sign of exasperation, beyond the recommendation of her usual panacea for all offenders. "He ought to be whipped," said she through her shut lips.

"What! the *Top?*" returned my father, smiling. "Well, that seems very appropriate."

"No, the editor," answered Cousin Jane.

"My dear, if the paper had been burned, as I have ays advised," said Aunt Ben gravely, "in some public

place, by the common— But hush! here comes your brother."

By tacit consent, not a word was said about the matter in Cecil's precence. It was idle to expect him to forget it—indeed, it was plain to all of us that he thought of nothing else; but we strove to persuade him that we ourselves made light of it. Those days that succeeded the magistrates' meeting at Holksham were very sad ones, their darkness relieved only by a sort of lurid expectation derived from the coming trial. What disclosure would it bring about? What course would Batty's scanty wits induce him to take? Would he persist in his present story, and above all, would his possession of the gold be, by any other means than it, accounted for? If that could be done, his curious hallucination as respected Cecil must needs be taken by everybody—even by the editor of the *Top*—for what it was really worth. In the mean time, Cecil kept at home, shrinking from every eye.

The Rector called again, with the intention, as before, of expressing to him the kindly feelings by which he was personally animated towards him, and of disavowing all participation with his father's conduct on the bench. But, to the regret of us all (save one), Cecil refused to see him; not, as I honestly believe, through anger, but because he really felt unequal to the interview. His nerves were shaken to the centre, and he might well decline to listen to any allusion to the cause; and, moreover, perhaps he dreaded that Mr. Bourne, in his injudicious zeal, might even have something to say upon another subject, quite as delicate, and just now hardly less painful.

The exception I have referred to was Cousin Jane. She expressed her conviction that Cecil was quite justified in his objection to hold any communication with the

rectory people—a condemnation sweeping enough, and which was made so, as I well understood, in order to include Eleanor.

The longest days drag themselves out somehow, and that preceding the assize at Monkton came round at last. My father had engaged lodgings in the city for Cecil, himself, and me, and we were to drive thither early in the morning. Dinner—a meal now almost untouched—was over; it was a beautiful evening, but Cecil had retired as usual to his own room, while Aunt Ben and Jane had taken their work out into the stone verandah that ran round the front of the Manor-house, and my father had joined them with his book. I was lying on the grass in front of them, elaborating a dramatic plot, into which the incident of stealing props from a sand-pit would perpetually intrude, like King Charles I. into Mr. Dick's memorial, when my eye caught the flutter of a white dress in the winding avenue. I rose in quite a leisurely manner, and walked into the house through the opened drawing-room window.

"He's got an idea," observed my father, "and is going to write it down;" and called out to me, "Are you sure it's your own, Fred?"

"I believe so, sir," said I demurely; then, once out of their sight, ran round to the front door, and met my Eleanor. She was pale, notwithstanding that she had also been running; and I knew by her sweet eyes that she was the bearer of some serious intelligence. "What is it," said I, "my darling; for I see you have brought news?"

"I have," answered she, almost breathless.

"Don't be in a hurry," said I. "Take time, and refresh yourself" (here we interchanged the refreshment of a kiss). "It must be good news to *me*, at all events, since it brings *you* here."

"I hardly know whether it is good or bad," replied she; "it's"—here she looked up quickly at an upper window; it was my cousin's, and there he stood, waving his hand, and trying to smile in his old fashion—"O, good gracious! why, he must have seen us," whispered Nelly in great confusion.

"Never mind, my darling," said I assuringly. "If he did, it only reminded him of somebody else's kisses; and even the recollection must be welcome to him, poor fellow, in his present trouble."

"Ah, yes; it is about that that I am come, Fred. I was not told to do so, and perhaps I ought not; but I could not bear that you should be kept in suspense an hour longer than was necessary. News has just arrived from Monkton—terrible news; and yet, though it is so shocking, perhaps it will put an end to all this dreadful trouble. Poor Batty has committed suicide—hanged himself in his cell."

"Good Heavens! are you quite sure that this is true?" I had no doubt that it was so; but asked the question mechanically, in order to give time for my own thoughts to work. Was this catastrophe for Cecil's advantage or not? On the one hand, it would quash farther proceedings; on the other hand, it would leave the question of Batty's having had a confederate a mystery more impenetrable than ever.

"O yes, it's true," said Nelly. "The village constable himself, who had just returned from Monkton, whither he went this morning, to be in readiness for the trial to-morrow, brought word of it to grandpapa;" and here a blush betrayed that she was not ignorant of the reason which scandal at least had suggested for old Mr. Bourne's interest in Batty's fate.

"Let us come and tell my father," said I gravely;

"they are all in the verandah. Did you hear any cause assigned for the poor creature's putting an end to himself?"

"He had pined and fretted ever since he was committed to jail. Having always lived in the open air, he could not endure the confinement, it seems; at least there was no other reason given."

Here we rounded the corner of the house, and came in sight of the party I had just left. Jane rose at once, as if to go indoors; but I called out to her that Nelly had brought news about the trial, and she stopped at once, like one changed to stone, with a foot upon the window-sill, and her hand pressed to her breast.

"Good Heavens! what is it?" cried Aunt Ben. "Have they found the man who bribed poor Batty?" For my aunt, who, of all of us, knew Batty best, by reason of her ministrations in the village, had not a doubt that his tale was so far true.

"If they have found *him*," said Jane sarcastically, "they must be very clever. It is much more likely that they have discovered Batty to be more knave than fool."

"He is dead!" said Eleanor simply. "He hanged himself this morning in his cell in Monkton jail."

"The Lord have mercy on him!" ejaculated Aunt Ben; "and I think He will, for I don't believe the poor soul meant harm. Indeed, his leaving life in that way shows him to have been mad."

"Or guilty," said Jane coldly. "Indeed, we know as much as that already. Well, I confess, for my part, I am very glad;" and she looked so.

"O, Jane!" said my aunt reprovingly; "we should surely never rejoice in a fellow-creature's death."

"Fellow-creature! Why, even according to your own showing, Aunt Ben, he was an idiot."

"Hush, hush!" said my father quietly. "It has been

categorically proved of late that the intellectual difference between idiots and persons of average ability is not so great as that between Shakespeare and the same persons; so let us avoid all narrow views of human fellow-creatureship."

"Did poor Batty die without farther sign, Eleanor? I mean, is it said that he made any communication as respected this unhappy charge?"

This was a question which, of course, went home to us all; yet Jane, whom one would have expected, on her brother's account, to be the most concerned, seemed the most indifferent to it. Instead of showing the hushed anxiety of "hand and eye," that manifested itself in Aunt Ben, my cousin stepped within the drawing-room as Eleanor was about to speak, and there remained, in shadow, only just so long as sufficed to hear her reply.

"Batty is said to have remained obstinately silent ever since his committal," was the answer. "It was with difficulty they could even persuade him to take his meals."

There was an awkward silence, during which the closing of the drawing-room door informed us that my cousin had withdrawn into the house.

"It is strange how lightly Jane has always treated a matter that has so deeply affected her brother," observed Aunt Ben. "But I suppose this sad end of poor Batty, and his silence, rather bears out her view that the unhappy lad was even more witless than we imagined, and his statement mere wild and wandering talk—Don't you think so, Frederick?"

"So far as his words went," answered my father doubtfully, "that would be so, supposing they were unsupported by any other evidence; but there is still his possession of the money to be accounted for, and I confess it puzzles me. It is too large a sum not to be missed

if he had stolen it from any of our neighbours. If the gold had changed to dry leaves, as in the Arabian tale, it would only seem in accordance with so strange and weird a story; but there it is still, a solid fact."

"But you don't surely think that this matter will still continue to be a trouble to us?" inquired Aunt Ben disconsolately. "I am sure poor dear Cecil has fretted himself about it more than enough already. It is my belief that it is having a serious effect upon his health."

"Yes; he will need change," said my father thoughtfully: "a thorough change will be good for him on all accounts."

"You are not thinking of sending the boy away from home?" cried my aunt in alarm, for she was much attached to Cecil. "Well, I do really agree with Jane, that that is making far too much of the matter. I did hope, after what has just happened, that there would be an end of it for good and all."

"I am afraid not," said my father seriously; "for the fact is, it is only natural that the sudden end of this poor creature should give his statement a greater force than it had when he was alive. I had great hopes that to-morrow's trial would have somehow elucidated the truth; whereas now—though I would not for the world that Cecil should hear me say it—the matter is more mysterious and grave than ever, since all is left to be proved and *dis*proved."

"You are right, sir," said a piteous voice, that sent a thrill through us all; and there stood Cecil immediately before us—whose approaching footsteps on the grass had made no sound. It was easy to read in his pale and haggard face that he had heard my father's words, and that they had come upon him like the words of doom. "You are quite right, sir," repeated he. "God help me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Good-bye by Proxy.

WITH Batty died Batty's secret; or rather, the key of the mystery, which the poor fellow himself knew not how to use, was buried with him. In spite of all our pains, and my father spared neither his purse nor his trouble in the investigation, the village idiot's possession of those golden coins remained unaccounted for; while, of course, his own explanation of it, disproved though it had been in one important particular, lived and throve in men's minds, like an ill weed, wherever the soil was rank. My unhappy cousin did not tarry with us to see its full growth; and, notwithstanding we foresaw that his sudden departure must needs foster it, we were glad that he readily fell in with my father's proposition, that he should leave Gatcombe, and travel with his sister. The suggestion was made to him on the very evening on which the news arrived of Batty's decease, for Cecil was thrown by it into such a state of nervous depression, that it aroused our fears for his reason. It seemed to me—for youth imagines all passions to be enduring—that he would never smile again. He was, however, perfectly collected in his words and manner, and asked of me, next morning, a certain favour, with the air of one upon his deathbed, who demands a last service of his friend.

"So soon as I am gone," said he, "dear Fred, take this to Ruth;" and he gave me a small packet. "Be very gentle with her, for my sake. I shall never see her more, I know."

"But, indeed, I hope you will," said I, most honestly, for in our great trouble about his health and mind, the old regret for his attachment to the girl had almost faded

away. "When we see you next, you will be your old self again, and this foul slander slain."

"Yes, it must be slain," said he thoughtfully. "It will never die out; and while it lives, Fred, *my* life is not worth the having. Tell her I said *that*. I can trust you to tell her all, I know. Tell her that I love her now more dearly than ever, though I am about to put half the world between us." [He was going to South America.] "She will not stay here, perhaps; but if she needs aught at any time, I have told her to write to you. I remember how those last words of the Merry King were wont to touch you: "Don't let poor Nelly starve." Well, Ruth is more to me than Nelly was to him a thousand times, and I am more to you than the brother to whom he made appeal. You will see to this?"

"Of course, dear Cecil," assented I. "Can I do anything more for you?"

"No, Fred; there is nothing more to *do;* but try, when we are gone, to think a little kindlier of Jane. She is leaving, for my sake, a happy home, and the person she loves best in the world, though to no purpose."

I felt confused, as I well might, and stammered out some commonplace about one who was dear to him being always dear to us; but, "I don't mean *that*," he said. "You are all angry with her—you especially, I know—about this very matter that is driving me away. She does not take it enough to heart, you think, since it has crushed me; she is glad that Batty is dead, and was not greatly grieved at Waller's death. Well, all that is not her fault. Her sympathies are very strong, but they are narrow. She loves only a few people in the world; the rest are naught to her; but we whom she does love should pardon her. She would have me treat this dreadful charge with indifference, and is impatient at what she deems my weak-

ness. I sometimes think that she should have been the brother, and I the sister. But she loves me dearly, notwithstanding, Fred, and let that move your heart towards her, though it moves you nothing that she loves yourself. We are almost one, Fred, Jane and I."

The tender earnestness of his tone was indescribable; in his anxiety that his sister should possess our good-will, it was easy to see that he had, for the moment, forgotten his own sorrows. I promised him all I could, and then, at his own desire, departed to do his errand at Wayford. He wished to hear tidings of Ruth from my own lips before he left Gatcombe; but his resolution not to see her again, so long as a shade of suspicion attached to him of having had a share in her brother's death, was unalterable.

Accordingly, I went to Wayford, where Ruth was now residing quite alone, in the old cottage by the river. I had not seen her for many weeks, except on the occasion when she was carried forth half dead from the mouth of the sand-pit; and the change in her appearance for the better struck me as quite marvellous. She was sad and depressed, of course, and her melancholy became her, as it becomes all beauties who are somewhat lacking in refinement of expression. She was, it is true, attired far more tastefully than usual in a black silk dress, with a little white collar, the shape of which I recognised at once—and indeed her whole costume was the gift of Eleanor; but her tone and manner were also no longer what they had been; their roughness had been smoothed away; while the provincialism of her very speech, though still noticeable, was so sublimed that it seemed rather an attractive eccentricity than the coarse burr it had been. Sorrow, I knew, was said to be a great refiner, but such a change as this was beyond Sorrow's power to have

effected; and Love, I knew, was even a greater magician. But *was* this girl in love? I doubted it, as well I might, for had not Cecil himself confessed his doubt? If this change was due to mere culture, derived from association with him, how often must he have seen her, what pains must he have taken with her, and how apt a pupil must she have shown herself to be! This elucidation of the mystery was possible, for although Cecil's own nature was under no obligation to letters for its sensitiveness and delicacy, he was fully alive to their civilising influence.

Ruth received me with a little flush of surprise, but with perfect self-possession. It was very kind of "Master Fred" to come and see her, considering what things she knew had been said against her, and in what ill-favour she was held at the Manor-house. That was only natural, she owned, but yet it was not her fault.

To this I readily assented; nor could I help adding a little compliment upon the marvellous beauty which alone was to blame in the matter.

"Mr. Cecil says that I am beautiful," sighed she, "so I suppose it must be true; but it would be better, it seems, for poor girls to be born plain."

There was a bitterness in her tone which led me to avoid discussion upon this subject, and I at once entered upon the business on which I had come.

She opened the packet in my presence; it contained a long letter, and what seemed quite a little fortune in bank-notes. The latter she showed me with a quiet smile. "Your cousin is very generous," said she. "Will you think ill of me for accepting such a sum?"

"Far from it," said I. "In my opinion, it is his duty to provide for you in his absence; and since the duration of it is indefinite, it was necessary to make an ample

provision. When that is gone, he bade me say—what I am very glad to repeat—that you have only to apply to me, Rue."

She shook her head, with a grateful but sad smile. "No, Master Fred. This will be more than sufficient for me, until the time comes when I shall make my own living."

"Well, well, let us hope so, Ruth. But, remember, you are now alone in the world, without poor Richard to work for you."

She turned quite white at this mention of her brother, and sat down. She had hitherto been standing, out of mechanical respect, perhaps, for a visitor from the Manor-house, for, though she called me Master Fred, she was never otherwise familiar.

"Don't speak of Richard," said she. "Though he was near his end, and could never have seen another summer, I would give ten times this sum, if I had it, to see him sitting yonder in his old place in the chimney-corner. And yet, again, sometimes at night here," she added, with a shudder "when I seem to hear him coughing in his room, that terrifies me."

"You must not live here, alone, Ruth, any longer," returned I. "It is bad for you to do so, and now you are so rich, there will be no occasion. You can easily get some old school-friend out of the village to come and stay with you."

"O no," said she thoughtfully; "I shall not stay at Gatcombe now. I shall leave this at once."

"Not for a day or two, I hope," said I, "since Cecil goes to-morrow."

"I understand," said she, blushing deeply. "Gatcombe folk would say that I had gone with him."

"They say anything but their prayers, as Aunt Ben says, Ruth, so indeed it is but too likely."

"Yes; if they do not spare Mr. Cecil, but credit even him—at least some of them do—with having killed poor Richard, what would they not say of *me*? Not that I care, Master Fred, one pin for such as they," she added vehemently; "but there is Mr. Cecil himself to be considered."

"Well, he has certainly enough to bear of slander, as it is, Ruth. What is your opinion of poor Batty's wild story?"

"Don't ask me, Master Fred. I cannot bear to think about it; for when I do so, there comes into my mind a story that I have read about the devil assuming a human form in order to work evil: suppose he really did take your cousin's shape—and surely that is not more unlikely than that Mr. Cecil himself should have done that of which he is accused."

"That is true," said I, smiling; "still, I don't think it *was* the devil. In what book did you find so weird a story?"

"In one of these," said she, throwing open the cupboard of the dresser, in which was piled quite a little library. "Mr. Cecil has given me all those books; perhaps you will amuse yourself with them for a little, while I read his letter and reply to it."

If she had been a lady in Mayfair, in place of a cottar's daughter, she could not have made this suggestion with more *sang-froid* and as a matter of course; whereas, six months ago, to offer a chair and a glass of milk would have embarrassed her, besides exhausting her whole resources of entertainment. The secret of this transformation lay partly, as I now found out, in the books themselves, the majority of which were modern

dramas. Ruth had studied life, as it were, from the lay-figure, which, if not so good as the living model, can do wonders for an artist of imagination; and I began to comprehend that allusion of Cecil's to Ruth's dramatic talents which had so excited my surprise.

"And have you read all these books, Rue?" inquired I, forgetting, in my astonishment, that I was interrupting her in the act of literary composition. As it happened, she did not hear me, being exceedingly engrossed with her occupation, the mechanical difficulties of which were obviously very great. With head aslant, she sat at the deal table pursuing every up-stroke of the pen with a grave movement of her head, and every down-stroke with a severe pursing of her "cupidon" lips.

What a charming "secretary," or confidential page, thought I, would she make upon the boards, and what a credit she would be to a play, if she could only act the part as well as she looked it! I watched her in silence till her task was done, and she was folding up the letter, and then reiterated my question.

"Have you read all the books, Rue, in this cupboard?"

"The story-books? Yes, all, Master Fred."

"And the plays?"

"O, the plays I have learned almost by heart," answered she simply. "Mr. Cecil wished me to learn the words that the heroine has to speak in each, and I found it just as easy to learn the rest. One likes to know what is said to one, you know, as well as what one has to say one's self."

"Quite right," said I; "though Lady Repton used to compare the conscientiousness of that course of conduct with that of the gentleman who blacked himself all over to perform Othello. So you used to recite to Cecil, did you, from these plays?"

"He wished it," said she, not apologetically, but as one who gives an all-sufficient reason.

"But it gave you pleasure for its own sake, did it not, Rue?"

"I am not sure," answered she doubtfully. "When I did well, I liked it, because I saw that I had pleased him; but when I forgot my part, or spoke it ill, I was very sorry."

"But how strange that he should have set you such a task at all!" mused I, more to myself than interrogatively. "Though, to be sure, he is very fond of plays."

"I think Mr. Cecil thought it was the quickest way of making me a little more like a lady," was Ruth's unaffected reply.

"If such was his object," said I gallantly, "I am sure that your diligence has been well rewarded. The process has been most successful, I do assure you, and I have been wondering ever since I came here how its effect had been produced."

"No: have you really?" said she, her face lighting up with pleasure. "I am so glad to think that all his pains have not been thrown away."

"On the contrary, Rue, they have borne magic fruit; and besides, what an advantage you will find it, now that you are likely to be alone for a time, to have acquired a taste for reading! If you want more books, you have only to let me know, for we have plenty of them up at the Manor-house."

"Play-books?" inquired Ruth eagerly. "I mean like these."

"Well, no: there are plenty of plays, but they are all old ones, I am afraid, and such as—considering the object you have in view—will do you more harm than

good. I will look out, however, such as I think likely to suit you, and you shall have them to-morrow."

Her eager face darkened at the word, which it was plain reminded her of Cecil's abrupt departure and doubtful return.

"Thank you, Master Fred," sighed she. "Tell him —tell Mr. Cecil for me, that I will lay all he has said to heart, and do my best to please him. I will do that even if he never comes back, he may be sure."

"O, but he will come back, and very soon, I hope," said I cheerfully. "This mystery about your brother's death shall be cleared up, my father says, at whatever cost; and even if it be not, my cousin will think less seriously of this foolish slander some day, or find himself unable to keep away from you. I'm sure, if I were he, I should find it very difficult myself."

This little compliment, which had more truth in it than I should have thought possible previous to this interview, and which I paid in my best manner, was utterly thrown away.

"No, no," answered she sadly; "he will never come home again, nor back to England, until all is made clear. He says so here, and he has sworn it to me before."

There was more disappointment, as I fancied, in her tone, than distress, or, still less, despair. Yet it was plain that she entertained but very slight hope of his return at all. The conclusion I arrived at, on the whole, was so far consonant with my first impressions of the matter, that I did not think the girl was what is called "in love" with Cecil; but she was evidently attached to him by the bond of deep respect, and also by that of gratitude. She reminded me of some young girl, who, wooed by an old man to whom she owes all she has in

the world, would love him if she could, and endeavours to do so, but only with partial success.

"You will give this letter to Mr. Cecil," were her last words, spoken with feeling, but without any passionate emotion, "with my loving duty; and tell him I shall be patient, and never, never can forget him."

If she had really loved him, was it possible that the sense of inferiority of her own position could be still so keen as to compel her to call him "Mr. Cecil"? I thought not.

The next day Cecil departed. The leave-taking between us was a very sad one; more so, I do believe, even on his side, because of the act of separation, than by reason of its cause. For he and I were dear to one another as brothers; nay, dearer, for we had never experienced those fraternal quarrels, which are not always the renewals of love, nor used that excessive frankness too often peculiar to fraternity, which makes it and friendship such different things. Some excuse was afforded, by the painful circumstances under which he departed, for the contrast between the farewells of the household in his own case and in that of his sister; but even as it was, I felt pained on her account. It was evident she did not leave a single friend behind her. I threw into my own adieu, therefore, from compassion, a warmth which was not wholly genuine; and she held my hand, in a long, lingering clasp, that seemed to thank me for the effort. The rector and Eleanor had taken leave of my cousins on the previous evening, but the latter came down at the moment of their departure to repeat her good wishes. She offered her cheek to Cecil, which he kissed with a grateful blush; but when she would have embraced his sister, Jane drew back, and held out her gloved hand.

"We shall see you soon again, I trust, dear Cecil," said I.

"I trust so too, Fred. But not here," he added in a low voice. "I shall never see Gatcombe more. You will write to me about your dear selves, and—and—Ruth. No money will be spared, your father has promised me, to remove the fatal barrier that—"

"My dear Cecil, we shall be late for the train," interrupted Jane, in her sharp decisive tones.

I drew back from the wheels; the horses started; and Cecil's sentence remained unfinished. I knew, of course, what he would have said; but, doubtless, Jane imagined that he was leaving some message for Ruth Waller. Her countenance darkened; her colour deepened, as was her way when angry; the last look I saw upon her face was a frown.

CHAPTER XVIII.

In which my Father incurs the Contempt of all sensible People.

My forebodings as to the melancholy that would fall on Gatcombe after Cecil's departure were more than fulfilled. Before his coming, I had been well content, since friendship was unknown to me; but having known it, there was now a void in my life which nothing could fill. Eleanor, indeed, was left; but I seldom saw her, for she was forbidden to visit the Manor-house by old Mr. Bourne, whose wish was law to his son, though he obeyed it unwillingly; while the rectory doors were, of course, closed against myself. The home of my youth had lost its joys for me:

> "From end to end
> Of all the landscape underneath
> I found no place that did not breathe
> Some gracious memory of my friend."

So vexed was I with all that had contributed to his depar-

ture, that my heart was once more steeled against Ruth; and instead of taking her the promised books at once, I delayed doing so for ten days; and when I did visit Wayford, she had left the village, no one knew whither, unless indeed Cecil knew. This, however, could scarcely be the case, since under cover to me he addressed a letter to her—written at sea—which I was of course unable to deliver. The tone of his epistle to myself was very tender; he called to mind our years of companionship, unsullied by dispute; our common occupations and pursuits; the homely joys he should never share again; and bared his whole loyal heart.

"When your first play comes out, dear Fred, I will come and see it from the antipodes itself, if I be there. Don't give way to despondency. [This was in allusion to a letter I had sent him to Liverpool, and which he received the day he sailed.) *You will see my face again, Fred never, fear.* In the mean time, the play, "the play's the thing." Your Eleanor shall see you famous, and blushing before the footlights; I predict it. Tell her I feel the kiss she gave me still burning on my cheek; and give her one for me."

There was little allusion to himself. He wrote with characteristic unselfishness, about my own affairs. "Your father, I am sure, will let you take your own way about the stage. It is what you are born for; and he, on his part, only lives for you. God bless you both."

"May I see Cecil's letter?" said my father; and, of course, I placed it in his hand, though not without misgivings. He read it, looked grave, and returned it to me without a word. It was not surprising, I thought, that its reference to my writing plays, as a profession, should be unwelcome to him. It seemed, however, that he had another cause for gravity; for he mentioned to Aunt Ben,

before he left the breakfast-table, that he feared we were going to have fever in the village. "Both the Stoddarts are down with something, which Cherwell" (the doctor) "does not like the look of."

"Indeed? I will go and see them," said Aunt Ben quickly.

"If you think it right," was my father's quiet rejoinder, "do so—but there is no occasion for *you*, Fred, to go into the village just at present."

"Very good, sir," said I carelessly, for youth is selfishly indifferent to such matters, and I was thinking of Cecil's letter.—"The cottage is Mr. Bourne's property, is it not?"

"Yes; and if it *is* fever, he has, I fear, himself to blame for it. His cottages are the worst drained in the place; and notwithstanding that his son has represented to him the wrong he thus inflicts on the community, he will apply no remedy."

"He is a wicked old wretch," observed Aunt Ben with cheerful alacrity. "Nothing, I believe, is sacred with him—not even human life itself."

"*Auri sacra fames*—he has the divine hunger," rejoined my father apologetically.

"Well, I hope he has," said my aunt; "but I doubt it, if it's anything good."

Without being what is called "a good hater," Aunt Ben did not lose in her Christian principles, what many weak people are too apt to part with, an honest contempt for meanness of all kinds. In our general philanthropy and universal brotherhood, we are sometimes inclined to open our arms to rogues and tyrants; but my aunt knew the wheat from the tares.

The Holksham doctor, in whose district Gatcombe also lay, joined our little dinner-party that evening; and

though nothing was said at table about the matter, I knew that his fears had been confirmed as to the nature of the epidemic in the village, and that it was no longer confined to a single cottage. On the next day, the church-bell tolled both in the morning and in the afternoon—an unprecedented occurrence at Gatcombe; and I observed that our domestics looked pale and frightened.

"Is the fever very bad?" asked I of Aunt Ben.

"Yes, Fred. If I was your father, I should send you away. He was only saying this morning what a relief it is to him that Cecil and Jane are not with us."

"Good heavens!" said I; "but if there is really danger, is not Eleanor in the midst of it?"

"It is her place to be there, as the clergyman's daughter; or, at least, she thinks so. Never fear for her, Fred: God protects His own angels. If you had seen her, as I have seen her, these last two days, you would have felt sure of that."

"So I, not being an angel, ought to leave Gatcombe, you think, while Nelly, and you, and my father run all risks?"

"Of course; since we are of use, and you can be of none. If anything was to happen to you, Fred, it would break your father's heart, and yet he is too proud to say so. That is so like a man."

"And yet, Aunt Ben, I think you would think it was very *un*like a man, if I was to say to my father: 'This fever frightens me; let me go away and hide somewhere out of the way of it.'"

"No; of course you can't do that. But what I want is this: to impress on you, that if your father should suggest your leaving Gatcombe on any other pretence, however apparently insufficient, do not balk him, for what he will really have in his mind is to save your life." I

suppose I could not suppress a smile, for she added vehemently: "If you think that there is not peril, Fred, and great peril, too, you are much mistaken. The fever is of the most virulent sort. If a mad dog was known to be loose in the village, you would say there was danger there, I conclude. Well, there are, as it were, half-a-dozen mad dogs there loose already; and before the week is out, there will be a whole pack."

This prophecy was fulfilled to the letter; the church-bell began to toll daily, and on the Sunday it did not ring for church, for the rector himself was taken ill. No sooner did I hear this news, than, forgetting my promise about not visiting the village, I started for the rectory in hot haste. At the gate of the avenue my father met me.

"Fred," said he reproachfully, "I did not think this of you. I charged you not to come up here; and you do not obey me. Beware lest *He* should keep *His* word who says the fruit of disobedience is death."

"But, sir," urged I, "I have just heard that Mr. Bourne has got the fever, and I must see Eleanor, and—"

"What for?" returned my father. "She is where she ought to be—by her father's pillow; I have just left her there. If she is fated to catch the disease, your presence will not prevent her doing so, while your life will be endangered to no purpose. Her own lips have just besought me to keep you out of harm's way; I had thought that my injunctions would have been sufficient to do so, but I now add her entreaties to my own."

"It appears to me, sir, that you would make a coward of me," said I bitterly, for the thought of Eleanor's peril swallowed up even consideration for my father.

"No, no, Fred," returned he tenderly. "It is I that am the coward; I confess it."

What could I do, in return for such an avowal of

affection, but take his hand and promise that unless Eleanor was herself attacked by the fever, I would not pass the gates?

He expressed himself as gratefully as though I was thus taking measures for the preservation of his own life instead of mine; and after dinner that evening, for the first time referred to the contents of Cecil's letter, with the sense, I am sure, of my having earned their calm discussion at his hands. The subject of my future calling—because it suggested our separation—was always distasteful to him; while to have to disagree with me on the point was still more painful. And was it possible for however fond a father to do otherwise than disapprove the idea of his son's becoming by profession a writer for the stage?

He entered upon the subject characteristically enough. As we strolled upon the lawn, and passed into the shadow of a fragrant lime, he looked up into its green and murmurous depths, and quoted, from Mackenzie's "Praise of a Country Life,"

"Be sure no laurel casts so sweet a shade;"

then he went on to speak of the pursuit of Fame, its disappointments, the tardy fruition of it, and its unsatisfactoriness even when attained.

I listened respectfully, and not without gratitude to the generosity which led him to thus discuss the general question, when it would have been obviously so much easier for him to point out the folly and impracticability of my particular plan.

"I have mixed with the world, dear Fred, myself," concluded he, "and was once the very opposite of the recluse you have known me. If experience can ever be of use at secondhand, it should be so to you, for you know I am incapable of deceiving you. Take this, dear

boy, as truth, then, from your father's lips—'a mind content both crown and kingdom is,' and cease to hanker after what is not even gold, but worthless tinsel."

I did not answer, for I naturally imagined, from his words, that my case had been considered and finally adjudicated upon. Then he laid his hand upon my shoulder, and added sadly, "But perhaps, Fred, your mind is *not* content?"

"It is not, sir," said I, "I own. I have, it is true, no reason to complain of anything that you have done for me."

"Nor left undone?" inquired my father quickly.

"No, sir; nor left undone. I do not regret that I have never been at school." I knew what was in his thoughts: the consciousness that he loved to have me with him, and shrank from parting with me, sometimes made him reproach himself—quite unnecessarily, as I still think—for not having intrusted my education to other hands. "It is impossible that my boyhood could have been more happy; and indeed, until quite lately, my whole life. But—" Here I hesitated; for how could I tell him that his love, and the home he had made so pleasant, no longer sufficed me?

"You would say that Gatcombe is but a dull place, Fred, now that Cecil is gone. Well, it is but natural that you should feel it so. I have made up my mind to part with you for a time. You shall go to college."

"Very good, sir; if it so pleases you."

"That means, it would not please *you*, Fred? Yet, to most lads, college is a pleasant place; and that companionship you now miss would there be supplied to you in abundance."

"But I am not fit to go to college," said I. "I know little or nothing that is taught there—not that I blame

you for that, sir, for I have no desire for such knowledge; but such is the case, as you well know."

"What *do* you want, Fred?" inquired my father, not angrily, but with the vehemence of one who wishes to know the worst at once. "You don't wish to go and live in London by yourself, at your age, surely, in hopes to carry the citadel of Fame at your pen's point?"

"I should like to try my fortune, sir, with—on—in dramatic writing. Of course, I seem very young for such an experiment; but Lady Repton tells me that all I need is knowledge of practical details, which I can only acquire by observation. You have told me yourself that my talents as a playwright are far from contemptible. Perhaps you are wrong in so judging; and perhaps my own self-confidence is misplaced; but if so, we shall soon find it out. I can but try, you know: all I ask is a fair field."

My father looked at me with an affectionate pity.

> "'Ah, worthless wit,'" he murmured, "'to train him to this use:
> Deceitful arts, that nourish discontent.'"

"Nay," said I; "the art you have taught me to admire, so far from making me discontented, has been the greatest pleasure of my life, and is so."

He smiled to see me so eager to defend him from himself, but shook his head. "I never dreamed that you would have taken our little recreations so dreadfully in earnest, lad. Indeed, indeed, it will not do. The glories of the stage,

> "Like glow-worms, afar off shine bright,
> But looked to near, have neither heat nor light.'"

"Well, let me look at them near, and find them so," urged I. "Then I will acknowledge my error. *If* I fail, it will not break my heart."

"I am not so sure of that, dear lad," said my father gravely.

"'Full little knowest thou, who hast not tried,
What hell it is in suing long to ride;
To lose good days that might be better spent;
To waste long nights in feverish discontent;
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares;
To eat thy heart, through comfortless despairs;
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To spend, to give, then find thyself undone.'

You are not of the family of the Thickskins. The noble savage, however noble, is not fitted to contend against a race that is clothed in armour, or, rather, that is pachydermatous. My dear Fred," added my father, drawing himself up, and speaking with a scorn of which I did not think his nature capable, "you have no idea of the grossness of the people with whom you would have to do—their vulgarity, their jealousies, their— Is it possible that Lady Repton has deceived you in this matter? I thought I could have trusted her to have told you the whole truth."

"She did not seem to like theatrical managers," said I demurely; "and she told me that the stage would be a delightful profession, if it were not for the actors and actresses."

My father laughed at this, and rubbed his hands; and I hastened to press what I considered to be my advantage.

"I daresay the stage is a corrupt school, sir; but then I don't wish to go on the stage, but to write for it. You have often told me that you believe I have good principles; and, thanks to you, I trust it is so.

'What though I on a sledge be drawn,
And mangled by a hind,
I do defy the traitor's power;
He cannot harm my mind.'"

"Your quotation is not a happy one," observed my

father coldly, "since its author passed the whole of his own short life in misusing his talents to the worst of purposes." (The unfortunate Chatterton was never forgiven by my father for having feloniously imitated, and, still worse, for having occasionally surpassed his favourites, the old English poets.) "I was not, however, referring to the mere vices of the stage, from which, I believe, you would, for more than one reason, be preserved" (here I blushed, for I knew that he referred to my love for Eleanor), "so much as to the low standard of morals generally, which, as I have been told on good authority, is held by those connected with it. You are very young and impressionable; and even if it were otherwise, the influence of constant contact with shallow, vulgar natures must needs be baneful. I cannot let you go, Fred, from my side into the midst of so many perils. If I had friends in London who could offer you a home—any relative, such as your Aunt Ben, for instance—I would not balk you of your humour, fantastic as it would seem to most fathers. But as it is, dear Fred, I must say 'No' decisively. When this trouble in the village is over, we shall all need change, and perhaps we three may go up to town together; and then you shall try your luck as you desire, and plumb the depths of ocean safely from the shore."

I had bowed my head when he said "No," in disappointment, but in submission; for, eagerly as I longed to enter life on my own account, my father's will was law to me; and now that it seemed he himself was after all about to place me in the very path I would have chosen, I could scarcely find words to express my gratitude and joy.

"Well, well, my lad," said he, embracing me fondly, "I have no doubt that all wise men will say I spoil you.

Don't tell Aunt Ben that I have given in thus far to your wild fancies, or she will think I have taken leave of my senses. She will have no objection, however—if I know the sex—to stay a few months in town.—And now let us go in, for it is getting cold."

He shivered, not as I fancied, for the reason he assigned, for it was a warm windless night; but because the thought, that all our quiet days together at Gatcombe were nigh ended, struck a chill to his very heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Sick-room.

THE next morning, my father did not take his usual place at breakfast; and my aunt herself came down later than was her wont. I noticed that she held a letter in her hand, though it was before the usual post-time, and was looking very grave.

"What is the matter?" inquired I, with apprehension. "There is no bad news of Cecil, I hope?"

"No, dear; nor any bad news at all, please God. But your father is rather indisposed this morning, and—this is a letter he wishes you to take to Monkton."

"For the doctor?" cried I, starting to my feet. "He must be ill, then."

"No, not for the doctor." I had my fingers on the door-handle, when Aunt Ben seized my arm. "You must not go upstairs. He has forbidden it. You are to take that letter to Canon Browne."

"To Canon Browne?" exclaimed I, with amazement. "Well, so I will, but not before I have seen my father. I am sure he is ill; I am certain of it by your face."

My aunt burst into tears.

"He *is* ill, Fred. I believe he has got the fever. I have been up with him since two this morning."

"Good God! while I have been dreaming of my own plans and pleasures! Has the doctor been sent for?"

"Hours ago. Everything has been done that can be done."

A bitter sense of my own selfishness pervaded me, and I groaned aloud.

"It is through no neglect of yours, Fred, nor of anybody's," said Aunt Ben gravely, "save of him who has let things come to such a pass in the cottages. But the truth is, the whole place is plague-smitten. Your father has written to his old friend the canon, beseeching him to take you in at Monkton for a week or two, and you are to start at once. I will see to packing up your things."

"What?" cried I indignantly. "I am to go and enjoy myself, while you are all sick and dying here!"

"I have given you your father's message, Fred," said my aunt quietly, but she trembled both in speech and limb.

"And you think I ought to obey it, do you?" demanded I. "You and he have your duties, it seems, and Eleanor and the rector—and even old Mr. Bourne, although he neglects them—but I have nothing to consult but my own safety. Is that your opinion, Aunt Ben? You love me well, I know, but *your* love does not surely blind you so to what is right for me to do, as to suggest such conduct?"

"I promised to do your father's bidding, Fred, and I have done it," said my aunt with a sigh of relief, and withdrawing herself from the door. "If you decline to obey it, I must say that in this matter I cannot blame you."

She held out her arms, and kissed me fondly.

"I knew you would not leave him, Fred," sobbed

she; "I told him so. Go up, and tend him, and may God preserve you both to one another!"

I have often wondered whether it would not be a good plan—though, of course, a very "ridiculous," "Quixotic," and "impracticable" one—to include in our present course of education, even if it should curtail it a little in other respects (such as Greek verse and conchology), one or two simple subjects the knowledge of which might make us useful to our fellow-creatures. For instance, since neither good birth nor wealth can debar those very vulgar visitors, Disease and Death, from making an occasional call, why should we not *all* be in some measure prepared for their reception? When our nearest and dearest are struck down by sickness, why should we be so ignorant of what is necessary to be done, as to be obliged to leave everything—even in the way of mere tendance—to hireling hands, or learn our duties at the expense of the patient? How gladly, if we *could*, would we minister to him, and smooth his pillow with our loving hands! but the consciousness of our incompetence forbids it. It is not that the calamity unmans us, but that, being something wholly out of our experience, we stand useless and agape at it. Our presence, which might have been so helpful as well as consolatory, is better dispensed with; our room is wanted for others who have aid to give; and we are "in the way." A coming in on tiptoe, often at undesirable times, to see our dear one; a hushed inquiry of his mercenary ally, the nurse, as to his progress; and a kiss of his forehead, or pressure of his hot hand, at morn and eve, are all the assistance we can offer to him.

It is true that women (all at least who are worthy to be called such) have more or less of this gift of ministering to the sick bestowed on them by nature; but men

have no such dower, and how often is it that, afar from country and from home, men fall sick among men only! In the upper classes of England, it is not too much to say, that more men would be found qualified to doctor a sick horse than to nurse a sick man.

The miserable failures that I myself made as an attendant at my dear father's bedside haunt me still, though, in the end, since there was plenty of time in which to learn, I succeeded in making myself useful. Unluckily, from the very first, he loved to receive his medicine and be turned on his uneasy pillow by my hands; to speak into my longing ears the broken words I could often not interpret; and, when at his worst, to be read to by my voice—most trying task of all, since, unaccustomed as I was to control my feelings, it would break down, choked with sobs.

Never shall I forget that first morning when I entered his sick-room—without my shoes, for fear my clumsy footsteps should disturb him—and gazed upon him as he lay with eyes half-closed, and cheeks that, by contrast with the white sheets, looked crimson. What thoughts passed through my brain of Death and Eternal parting, and the house without its head! What self-reproaches for not having valued at his worth the friend and father whom I might now lose for ever! As I inadvertently stirred the curtain, my father, thinking it was Aunt Ben returned, murmured anxiously: "Is he gone? Is Fred gone?"

"No, sir; I am here," said I. "Do not be vexed; I am come to nurse you. If, as you said, Eleanor's place was beside her father's pillow, surely mine is also there." I took the hand he would have drawn away, and kissed him. Then I knew that it would be too late to send me away, since, if I was to take harm, the mischief would be

already done; and I should be unsafe to be received elsewhere.

"My boy, my boy!" he murmured mournfully, but not reproachfully; and then such a contented smile came over his noble face that I felt my presence was a joy to him after all.

This "Gatcombe fever," as it was subsequently called in the neighbourhood, was almost as virulent and rapid in doing its evil work as the Plague itself. The heat of the weather, which was excessive, doubtless aided it; and the insufficient drainage, and neglect of all sorts in the village, was as fuel to its fire. Whenever, through the open windows of the sick-room, came the tolling of the church-bell, as it did daily, my father would inquire calmly: "Who is it, Fred?" and his words went to my heart like another knell. A new aspect of life had unfolded itself to me. Instead of amusements, and studies that were themselves amusement, completing the whole round of my existence, I was now brought face to face with the expectation of death. We talk of the ignorance of the rich as to the ways of the poor, and truly it is great and terrible, but not more complete than that of the sound with respect to the thoughts of the sick. It is good for us to have knowledge upon both points. The affairs of the world assume their just proportions only when we are leaving it, or are watching others leave it. What does this and that matter, which was so important yesterday, to him who is going beyond the stars to-morrow? or to us who are bidding him good-bye, and feel that we shall rejoin him there so shortly?

These ideas, however, did not affect me much at first. My father was always cheerful in his manner; and if he showed any apprehension of his illness having a fatal result, it was only in increased affection for those about him.

"If you want to see an angel before you go to heaven," said he, speaking of my aunt, "watch a good woman in a sick-room."

Aunt Ben made no noise with her wings; she never "broke down" as to her feelings; she forgot nothing that should be remembered; she introduced no topic that would have been out of place. The doctor and she had long conferences together with closed doors; but, no matter what she had heard, whenever she reëntered my father's room, it was with unruffled features; if she wept, she used some elixir for red eyes. On one day only, the first on which my father began to talk of his brother Thomas as though he were alive, did I see any change in her; she turned pale to her very lips, and confided to me that it always "gave her a turn" to hear people talk when delirious. I afterwards discovered, however, that the doctor had previously informed her, that if my father should lose his senses, it would be a bad sign. His memory did not fail him even at this pass. I heard him once repeat half-a-dozen verses of Byrom's "Careless Content"—the poem he liked best of all poems, save those of the Elizabethan era—though he imagined himself to be in Monkton Cathedral, repeating the responses.

'With good and gentle-humour'd hearts
I choose to chat where'er I come,
Whate'er the subject be that starts;
But if I get among the glum,
I hold my tongue to tell the truth,
And keep my breath to cool my broth.

* * * *

Of ups and downs, of ins and outs,
Of they're i' the wrong, and we're i' the right,
I shun the rancours and the routs;
And wishing well to every wight,
Whatever turn the matter takes,
I deem it all but ducks and drakes.

* * * *

I love my neighbour as myself,
Myself like him too, by his leave;
Nor to his pleasure, power, or pelf,
Came I to crouch, as I conceive:
Dame Nature doubtless has design'd
A man the monarch of his mind."

My father never wholly lost that monarchy, but, after a temporary abdication of it, would reassume it, and become himself again; then he would pray with us, and for us, using grand old prayers, such as Taylor's or Sir Thomas More's. But for the most part he lay as one who had long made his peace with God, and had leisure to concern himself with the affairs of those he loved.

"When I am gone, Fred—if I do go—you and Aunt Ben must not part."

This I most readily promised.

Then he asked to see Eleanor (this was after he had been ill for weeks); and she came accordingly, in black, for the rector had died on the third day of his seizure —a fact, however, which we had kept from my father's knowledge. I had not seen her, though Aunt Ben had done so, because of the word that I had given that I would not pass the gates, notwithstanding there was, of course, no danger now to be incurred that was not risked already. Every wish of my father's was become sacred.

We met in the drawing-room, and embraced one another in Aunt Ben's presence, without the least embarrassment; though my heart was so sad, it never held her dearer than at that moment, when I seemed not only her lover but her brother.

My aunt dressed her in some coloured clothes belonging to Jane, before she went into the sick-room, and she wore as cheerful a countenance as she could assume. But, as it happened, all our pains were needless; for my father, desiring to see her alone, she told him the whole truth,

being, as she said, unable to do otherwise; at which I did not wonder. He commended me to her, as she told me long afterwards, in the most tender terms, and blessed her as his future daughter-in-law.

To me, when she had departed, he repeated those exquisite lines of Middleton:

> "The treasures of the deep are not so precious
> As are the conceal'd comforts of a man
> Lock'd up in woman's love. I scent the air
> Of blessings when I come but near the house.
> What a delicious breath marriage sends forth!
> The violet-bed's not sweeter!"

"Your Eleanor is a true pearl, Fred. O, never leave her for a counterfeit!

> 'Base Passion,
> With all her powders, paintings, and best pride,
> Is but a fair house built by a ditch-side.'"

It was not worth while at such a time to speak of the obstacles which I foresaw would be opposed to our union, and, besides, his confidence in the matter gave me hope.

That was the last day on which my father was thoroughly himself. His mind now mingled past with present in sad confusion. He spoke again of my Uncle Thomas, but this time as if he had been accused of Richard Waller's death. "A shameful thing!" he murmured. "No Wray could do it. Well, well, I shall know all from him."

"From whom, father?" inquired I.

"From Batty, lad. I am going to see poor Batty. Why not?"

When he was almost at the last, we pressed the doctor to stay on with us, which he did; the Gatcombe fever having by this time burned itself out, like some ing prairie-fire, and thus left him some leisure; else

my father would never permit him to pay a longer visit than he imagined his own case to demand.

"Can *nothing* more be done?" inquired my aunt in a despairing whisper.

"Nothing but what we are doing, madam; the case is, alas, beyond all remedy."

Never shall I forget how the voice of the dying man, whom we had thought comatose, electrified us, as it broke in with this reply:

> "No, no; the remedy
> Must be a winding-sheet, a fold of lead,
> And some untrod-on corner of the earth."

Then he went on from the same old play of Ford's:

> "I have left me
> But one poor jewel to bequeath: my Fame,
> By scandal yet untouch'd; this I bequeath
> To Memory and Time's old daughter, Truth;
> If ever my unhappy name find mention
> When I am fallen to dust, may it deserve
> Beseeming charity without dishonour!"

These words, expressed with infinite pathos, though in weak and faltering tones, were my father's last. He had his wish. No man of his race or place ever died more beloved, or left a memory more unstained behind him. An enormous concourse of persons of all ranks attended his funeral, notwithstanding the danger of coming to our decimated village, and especially on such an errand. Of all our immediate neighbours, Mr. Bourne alone made himself conspicuous by his absence; in any other man, an excuse would have offered itself in the fact of his own recent bereavement; but it was evident that he did not wish excuse to be made for him, for he showed himself ostentatiously elsewhere.

CHAPTER XX.

I ask Grandpapa.

At first, I was so filled with the sense of my great loss, that there was no room for any other feeling; what old Mr. Bourne might think or do, was absolutely without interest to me. The Manor-house seemed like a vault, and though the summer grew and glowed about it, all was with me as faded autumn. My father's study, where I had listened to his wise words a thousand times, and never heard a hasty one, was become a holy place; for the first time I began to understand the reverence which attaches to mere sacred *things*. The chair in which he had been wont to sit at dinner-time was put aside; I could not use it. His favourite books were become solemn scriptures, and the quotations so familiar to his lips like hallowed texts.

As regards all that related to my father personally, indeed, it has never been otherwise; the link of love between us, by the miracle that only Love can work, has lengthened without growing weaker; but as time went on, I found myself looking less and less within myself, and more and more upon the world without. The want of occupation began to make itself felt, and the need of something to supply, however inadequately, the noble companionship I had lost for ever. Aunt Ben was all she could be to me, and far more than I deserved; but my heart yearned for consolation of another sort, and it was denied me. Not only was Eleanor forbidden by her grandfather to visit us on any pretence, but to converse with me if we chanced to meet. I often saw her at a distance, haunting the spots where we had been wont to be so happy together years ago; but I did not dare approach her, lest I should draw down upon her the old

man's wrath; for, orphaned like myself, she had no comforter at home, as I had in Aunt Ben, but only the society of this crabbed relative, who had power to make her life even more wearisome and sombre than it was, through his ill-humour. How strange it seemed that my father, whom all loved, and whose existence was a joy to others, should have been taken from the world he brightened, while this old withered wretch, who had wrought naught but harm, should be left in it, standing not only between me and Eleanor, but between all men and the sun! For his influence was that of an evil spirit, unhappy in himself, and hating to see others happy. Fear and Hate were the demons that sprung up at his footstep; and if the lips of Subservience wished him "good-morrow," in her heart she wished him dead.

"Well, he is old," thought I, "and must needs die soon; and in the mean time patience!" But it is not so easy to practise that virtue as to talk about it; and when I reflected how much less easy it was for Nelly to practise it than for me, I felt very bitter against the old man. This was but natural, perhaps; but beside my strong personal feeling toward Eleanor, the recollection that my father had expressed his wish that we should be united, weighed with me very powerfully; and I looked upon "the Alchemist" as a rebel against an authority that was to me almost divine.

This was most unreasonable, I own.

Many weary months had thus passed by, when a second letter arrived from Cecil, written from South America, and full of his first impressions of its wondrous scenery. He represented all things as brightly as he could; but it was clear to me, by the feverish eagerness he expressed for news from home, that no change of scene would give him any genuine pleasure while Batty's

statement remained undisproved. There were many affectionate messages—they touched me to the heart—for an ear that was deaf for ever; and in addition, a curious native account of the origin of crocodiles' tears, which he thought would tickle my father's sense of humour. "These creatures having devoured a man, find themselves unable to swallow the head; and taking it to a solitary spot, they are accustomed to bewail their inability to conclude their meal with tears." Then immediately afterwards, though the proximity was certainly not due to any association of ideas in the writer's mind, occurred these words: "Dear Jane bids me send her love to all at Gatcombe. How selfish it is in me to have carried her away from home and friends, that she never ceases to bewail, I know, though she does her best, for my sake, to hide her tears!"

"The poor thing can't swallow our heads," exclaimed Aunt Ben, as I read this out; at which we laughed together, the first laugh that had been heard in the old house for many a day.

Cecil made no allusion to Ruth, but a letter was enclosed to her as before, which I was obliged to put aside with the other one. How strange it seemed that she had not confided to either of us whither she was going! My cousin's communication ended with renewed expressions of tender affection for us all, and a kindly message for Nelly. "Have you asked papa," inquired he, "and grandpapa? I should indeed be glad to hear that your happiness was assured, even if the fulfilment of it should not be for the present, not only upon your own account, dear Fred, but on another's. I fear there is still some hope in a quarter where I grieve to see it. In fact, the news that your engagement had been acknowledged would be to me only less welcome than that other

piece of intelligence, for which I pant as the hart for the waterbrooks."

I could not give this letter into my aunt's hands because of its allusion to Jane's misplaced affection for myself; but when I had read the rest of it aloud, she observed, "Dear Cecil is a curious mixture—so wayward and impulsive in his own affairs, and wise and sensible when thinking for others."

"Do you think his advice is good as respects Nelly, aunt?"

"Unquestionably, Fred," she answered. "I was only waiting for an opportunity to suggest it to you myself. It is quite impossible that you can live on at Gatcombe in this way; you will be moped to death; and before you leave it, it is only right that you should understand your exact position with respect to dear Eleanor. Mr. Bourne is bound to express himself clearly upon that point, and the sooner you come to an understanding the better. I am quite sure that her poor father was in favour of your union; a fact which, at all events, will prevent that wretched old man from talking about the duty of obedience. He is *such* a canter! I sometimes wonder whether any people *do* talk about duties except those that habitually neglect them."

Since the outbreak of the fever, that "wretched old man" was more abhorrent to my aunt than ever, though I never heard her directly accuse him of having been its cause; perhaps she was too charitable to do so, and perhaps her religious opinions were of a nature to attach the sense of "visitation" to such calamities, rather than to account for them in a material way. Her present bitterness, as I suspected, arose from the consideration that the Alchemist would oppose himself to my projected

proposal to the uttermost; and I asked her frankly whether such was her opinion.

"I scarcely know what to say, Fred," she replied. "The old man, like all *parvenus*, is doubtless desirous of an alliance for his granddaughter with a family of position and good blood: he would not mind—not much, at least—the want of means in such a *parti*. I even think that at one time he did not look unfavourably upon your own intimacy at the Rectory. But the unhappy circumstances connected with poor Batty have undoubtedly embittered him against us. He can't refuse you an interview, of course; but you must be very careful how you play your cards. In any event, you must not quarrel with him, for Eleanor's sake."

"Of course not," said I indignantly. "Why should I quarrel, when, whether he says 'Yes' or 'No,' will not affect our future in the least, except so far, I suppose, as his filthy money goes?"

"Yes, but you mustn't tell him *that*, my dear Fred, but, on the contrary, be very submissive and conciliatory; and you must not talk of money as 'filthy,' because it is with him a very sacred thing. You will have to lay before him the state of your own affairs, with which, of course," added my aunt dryly, "you are fully acquainted."

"I am not quite sure that I am," said I with hesitation.

"I am quite sure that you are *not*, you silly boy," was Aunt Ben's rejoinder. "When your father's will was read, I doubt whether you heard three words of it. Well, you have no fortune, of course, to be called such, but still enough to live upon in a quiet way: the Manor-house and what land is left about it are of considerable value, and will have a fancy price in the old man's eyes,

who has so long been hankering after them. You can point out to him how complete the Gatcombe estate would be made by an alliance between the heir of the old race and the daughter of the new: but don't be too romantic, Fred; I would not advise you to try poetry, because I don't think he's fond of it."

She spoke quite seriously, and I said, "Thank you, aunt. I should have thought Mr. Bourne was just the sort of person to delight in music, poetry, painting, and the fine arts; but I bow to your better judgment."

"You may laugh, my dear," returned she good-humouredly; "but my belief is that I could manage this affair much better than you; however, I suppose that wouldn't be quite business-like."

"I am afraid not," said I doubtfully; "or else I am sure I should be delighted to have you for my advocate, and indeed to have a much less efficient proxy. I do so very much dislike that old gentleman! 'Hang him, Rook,' as my poor father used to say."

"Yes, but you must forget all that when you are talking to him. Think of Eleanor, and that will bring a pleasant expression into your features. — By the bye, Fred, when speaking of your own affairs, you will not omit, of course, to mention your expectations."

"Expectations! What expectations?"

"Well, my dear, the word speaks for itself. God forbid that anything should happen to Cecil; but I suppose no contingencies ought to be left out when dealing with these matters, and especially with an old schemer like Mr. Bourne. You are your cousin's heir-presumptive, remember."

"My dear aunt," exclaimed I reprovingly, "I am astonished at you: nothing could induce me to hint at

such a thing to Mr. Bourne, and indeed the idea has never entered my own mind."

"So I supposed, and that is why I mentioned it," observed Aunt Ben coolly. "However, whether you hint at it or not, it is quite certain that Mr. Bourne will not forget the fact; so it does not much matter."

The opinion which my aunt had passed on Cecil, that he was impulsive in his own affairs, but thoughtful for others, might, in fact, with a little modification, have been applied to herself. She was disinterested and unselfish, even to excess; but when her advice was sought by those she loved, she was eminently shrewd and practical; nor is such inconsistency uncommon, especially in the female sex.

The very next morning after this council of war (and love), I put a bold face upon a beating heart, and walked up to the Rectory. The new clergyman, a young bachelor, had been glad to let the house for a consideration, and lived in lodgings in the village, while Mr. Bourne and Eleanor retained their old home. It was a pretty little house, overgrown with jasmine and honeysuckle, the scent of which, as I think of that visit, is fragrant still. I did not dare look up at the window, lest the sight of Eleanor should disturb my equanimity, but like an eager dog, kept my eyes fixed downcast on the door.

"Is Mr. Bourne at—" I had begun, before I perceived that it was the old gentleman himself who had opened it to me. I think he enjoyed my confusion thereupon, though he never evinced any sign of enjoyment beyond a momentary stretching of the lips, which instantly returned to their due limits, like an india-rubber band. He was very tall, but stooped a good deal, and carried his head on one side, like a cunning fox as he

was. His hair was white as snow, but so it had been for years, and his face had a fresh brown colour, which boded length of days.

"To what am I indebted for this visit, young sir?" said he, looking through and through me with his keen black eyes, the only attribute his granddaughter and he had in common. "I thought I had let you know you were not welcome here; but being lord of the manor, perhaps you imagine you have a right to come where you please."

He spoke with mocking severity, and in allusion, as I well understood, to some disagreement which my father and he had had long ago respecting a right of way. I felt such an allusion to be not only in the worst taste, but to signify a hostile attitude: but I thought of Eleanor and smiled.

"I wish to have a few minutes' private conversation with you, Mr. Bourne," said I.

He led the way into his business-room—a bare parchment-littered apartment, which by no stretch of courtesy could have been termed a study—closed the door, and without asking me to sit down, wheeled about and exclaimed: "Well, what is it?"

How lightly Time and Loss affect some men! Here was one who had reached the threescore years and ten allotted to mortals, and had just seen his only son drop into the grave, the victim, in part, of his own neglect; and yet, but for his white hairs and his black clothes, there was nothing to proclaim either fact. The harshness of every feature remained unsoftened; the fire of his eye unquenched; his voice alone had that querulous tone which speaks of age, and even that had less of querulousness in it than of downright suspicion.

"I am come, sir, to speak to you about Eleanor,"

"So I suspected, young gentleman," returned he grimly, and regarding me with great disfavour. "I cannot prevent your speaking of her, but I will take care that you never speak *to* her—you may take your oath of that."

"May I ask you why, sir?"

"You may ask, of course; whether I shall answer or not is another matter. I will tell you this much, however, that if you think you are a great man because that tumble-down old house and a few acres of cottage-garden are now your own, you are much mistaken."

"I don't consider myself a great man, Mr. Bourne," said I quietly; "but I am a gentleman, I hope, and though not rich, I am not without independent means. There is nothing incongruous, I should suppose, or at least not so much so that it cannot be listened to, in my proposing for your granddaughter's hand. Her father, your son, was, as she will tell you, by no means averse to the prospect of my being her suitor. Of course, I am not speaking of anything immediate. We are both very young, and I have to make my way in the world. All we ask of you at present is to give us leave to meet occasionally, to correspond, and, in short, to be engaged to one another."

"Very reasonable indeed, I'm sure!" observed the old man in mocking tones. "It is very modest of you not to insist upon being married to-morrow, and on my allowing you five thousand a year! You say that my son was not averse to this little scheme: I daresay, now, that your own father was in favour of it?"

"He was, sir. He had a very high regard for Eleanor, and thought I should be most fortunate if I could win such a wife."

"And doubtless you think so too, young gentleman?"

"Indeed, I do, sir. I know very well that I am not worthy of her. As to her fortune—"

"That's right—now we are coming to it," sneered the old fellow, rubbing his hands, and inclining his ear towards me with much politeness. "Her eighty thousand pounds or so? Well, what of that?"

"I don't want her fortune, sir, if you will only give me Eleanor."

"And do you really mean to say that you are come up here to try such a stale device and sorry falsehood upon *me?*" exclaimed the old man angrily. "Your taste —inherited, I believe—for play-acting or play-writing—it's all one—must be indeed a ruling passion. Now hear me once for all. If you ever marry my grand-daughter, you will wed a beggar, for not a shilling—as your wife—shall she ever have of mine. To some folks, one would say: 'That is answer enough;' but you, forsooth—you Wrays—are careless about fortunes; lose them, spend them, and then affect to despise riches. Your father did so, and perhaps you may be like him; but though such high and mighty indifference—whether feigned or genuine, it matters not—be doubtless a fine thing, it is not so fine, remember, to make *others* poor (who may not possess such philosophy), in order to gratify your private vanity. You have no right, I say, to make a simple, ignorant girl blind to her own advantage, and sacrifice great prospects to your selfish pleasure."

As he said these words he watched my face like a ferret, and I suppose it betrayed some chagrin; for I had not expected him to take this line of argument, which certainly was not without its weight. "No, young man," he went on in milder tones, "we have all our duty to perform in this world, and our inclinations must submit to it. I will do you the justice to say that I do not be-

lieve you so devoid of principle as to strive to win my grand-daughter in direct opposition to my wishes."

I had not understood until that moment what my aunt had meant by calling Mr. Bourne "a canter;" he had never as yet had any necessity in my case to use the phrases of morality which he employed with my elders, when defending his own meanness, or advocating harsh enactments with respect to the poor; but I felt now as if I was being sprinkled with holy water by the devil, and with some difficulty restrained myself from saying so.

"So far as the principle of which you speak is concerned in this matter, Mr. Bourne," said I quietly, "I must frankly tell you that the approval of Eleanor's father is quite sufficient for me, though, of course, if I could gain your consent—"

"Which you never will gain," interrupted the old man coldly. "Let me frankly tell you that, young jackanapes. If it comes to frankness, indeed, I may say that there was a day when I might have answered you otherwise, and that you have nobody to thank for your present disappointment but your own father. When next you think of his high-mindedness, independence of spirit, generosity, and all the rest of it, you may think of that also, for your comfort."

It is impossible to describe in words the malice of the speaker's tone, or the antipathy which his sneering features expressed towards me.

"It will be my comfort to think," said I, looking at him steadily, "that not even to secure my happiness could my father be tempted to commit a baseness."

There was a moment when I thought the old man would have struck me, so terrible was the passion in his face at this allusion to his attempt to burk inquiry into Batty's case; but he curbed himself, and, in a half-

smothered voice, inquired: "Have you anything else to say, young gentleman, before we part, since this will be your last chance to say it?"

"Yes," said I, "I must be permitted to remark, that what you have just said with reference to my father, convinces me that your objection to my suit is founded, not on the grounds you would have had me believe—my insufficiency of fortune—but on hereditary dislike. My dead father did you what you choose to imagine a wrong, and you revenge yourself upon his son. That is cowardly and infamous!"

"You lie!" cried the old man, trembling with rage. "I always hated you, the whole lot of you, for your pride and stubbornness, that is true; but *you* are proud and stubborn, and a beggar as well; and my grand-child is meat for your master. The proudest family in England might be proud of her, ay, and the richest. Let her marry whom she will but you—*but you*—and she is my heiress; let her marry *you*, and she shall inherit nothing but my curse! Now, go." Here he led the way into the hall. "You have my answer, Pauper Wray."

Something in this depreciatory epithet, of the application of which he was obviously very proud, for he continued to repeat it—"Pauper Wray, Pauper Wray"—as he stood, with mock-politeness, with his hand on the outer door, reminded me of what my aunt had mentioned concerning the possibility of my succeeding to my cousin's wealth; I paused, therefore, upon the threshold, to observe: "I am no pauper, Mr. Bourne; but your constant harping on that word suggests to me that, notwithstanding your antipathy to my race, you might not have been so obdurate, had Cecil, instead of his poor cousin, come to woo your grand-daughter."

"Cecil, Cecil Wray!" cried the old man shrilly;

"how dare you say so! His heart is as black as his face! He is a murderer; and if I had had my way, I tell you I would have seen justice done, and had him hanged!"

I confess that it was wrong, but stung beyond endurance by this infamous speech, I forgot myself so far as to reply, with all the significance of which my voice was capable: "Nay, we are all sorry for poor Batty, sir, but you should not allow *paternal affection* to blind you to the fact that his statement was unfounded."

For an instant he glared upon me with a face convulsed by rage and hate, and then slammed the door behind me.

I doubt whether any course of conduct on my part, however diplomatic, would have much influenced the event; but, as it was, I felt that I had far from prospered in my wooing with grandpapa.

CHAPTER XXI.

How the great Mr. Magnus treated me.

I TOLD my aunt all that had passed between myself and Mr. Bourne, and although she took me to task for having been tempted to use bitterness, I don't think that she much blamed me in her heart for resenting his cruel words against Cecil.

"I never expected, my dear boy, that you would make much way with that wretched old man; but I saw that it was necessary that your position with respect to Eleanor should be defined."

"Yes," said I, rather doubtfully, I suppose, for Aunt Ben continued:

"You *have* made up your mind as to your future course, have you not, Fred?"

"Well," said I, "I cannot do Eleanor the injustice of

depriving her of her grandfather's fortune, can I? It would be shameful to allow her to sacrifice so much for me, though I do not doubt she would be willing to do so."

"Very good," said my aunt dryly.

"At the same time, you know," added I hastily, "I have no idea of giving Nelly up."

"Better," said Aunt Ben, "much better. I began to think that old gentleman had got the advantage of you. Well, what are you going to *do*?"

"I must wait," said I, rather testily, for I was annoyed that she should have thought me capable of giving Nelly up. "You would not advise my killing Mr. Bourne off-hand, would you?"

"Not while the detective is about here," replied she with gravity. (For that vigilant official was still what he called "prosecuting his researches" in the neighbourhood, at Cecil's expense.) "But you can't wait here, with nothing to do *but* wait; you must let the Manor-house, and live in London."

"This is what I should like to do, of course," said I. "But are you sure that *you* can live there, Aunt Ben? I know you detest town."

"My dear Fred," replied my aunt affectionately, "wherever your happiness lies will henceforward be my home. I should have hoped you understood that. If you have still a fancy for trying your fortune on the stage, by all means do so. Any occupation is better than none. I only wish I could help you in this one; but, except as a female pantaloon, I don't see my way to do so. I will not, however, be any obstacle, be sure of that—while if you fall amongst wicked women, as I believe all actresses are, and that Lady Repton as bad as any of them—"

"My dear Aunt Ben," cried I, "you astonish me!"

"O, I daresay. If any woman ever made love to a boy in her life, that woman made love to you. Lor' bless you! you must think me blind. However, for the future, I will take care of you. I shall tell Eleanor to make herself perfectly easy in her mind, for I will be your chaperon."

With a hearty laugh, she kissed me, and then began quite a serious talk about business affairs. If we could only let the Manor-house, we should have a sufficient income between us to live very comfortably together in town; and we decided to advertise it immediately, so as to be in plenty of time for the hunting season. I might without doubt have sold it at a good price to Mr. Bourne, who was exceedingly desirous of possessing it; but I did not like to part with the last piece of land that remained to the Wrays, nor with the old house, which my father loved—and especially to his enemy.

Gatcombe Manor was situated in convenient proximity to no less than three packs of foxhounds; it had ample stabling; and there was a legend, which the house-agent took upon himself to narrate as a fact within his private experience, that grouse had been seen upon the moor: these were the points on which his advertisement mainly dwelt; while our fine situation, and the magnificent prospect we enjoyed, were mentioned as subsidiary attractions. With this same enterprising agent my aunt had now a deadly quarrel: he had full leave to advertise freely, and he abused that liberty by patronising the columns of the *Turnip Top*. Happily for the success of his letter of apology, it was accompanied with an intimation that the house was let. Sir Richard Harewood, a sporting widower of middle age, was the lessee. My aunt wrote to inquire whether he had any small children—she had always an idea that our furniture was very valuable, and not to be ...ed to ravage—and his answer was satisfactory, though

curt: "Thank Heaven, I have none, madam, either small or great." He had fifteen horses, and as many thousands *per annum;* and his humour was, it seemed, to hire country-houses, and not encumber himself with a seat of his own. He came down in person to be "interviewed." A thick squat man he was, with a watery eye, and an unnaturally hoarse voice, acquired in the hunting-field, or from the brandy bottle, or perhaps from both.

"He'll have dogs all over the house," was my aunt's comment, when he left us an accepted suitor.

"I hope he will do no worse," thought I.

There was something about Sir Richard which made us feel no regret that he only took the place as a yearly tenant. This arrangement also afforded me an excuse for revisiting Gatcombe at the end of a twelvemonth. I was resolved to see Eleanor then, at all hazards; but for the present I was doomed to leave home without even wishing her good-bye. My aunt persuaded me to forego a farewell which would be certain to exasperate the old man against his grand-daughter, and promised to say all she could for me, in my place. Alas! "How little would that be!" I thought, though the dear good soul had all the will in the world to serve me. But even these good intentions of hers were frustrated, for Mr. Bourne remained in the room during the interview from first to last, with an evident resolve to prevent my name being mentioned; and it never was.

"Nelly gave me this little book as a parting gift," said my aunt, when she had done her narration, which had greatly depressed my spirits.

"It looks a very pretty one," sighed I.

"Yes; and it's a sort of book I'm so very fond of, you know—Lamb's *Specimens of the Old Dramatists.*"

"Why, she must have meant that for *me!*" cried I

excitedly. "I remember telling her I wished to have it. Didn't she say that?"

"How *could* she, you silly boy! She said, however, that she gave it with her kindest love, and that she had worked a book-marker for it. Here it is; and it's very lucky that wretched old man didn't happen to look at it. *Wait and Hope* is the motto—the application of which, Fred, I daresay you will be able to make out for yourself. At all events," added the old lady, with a sigh that was not perhaps altogether affected, "I don't see how it can apply to *me*."

That little strip of ribbon was afterwards an amulet against many an evil. Its colours faded, but the love and constancy of which it was the assurance never lost their brightness for me; when I was cast down, it cheered me; when I was weary with waiting, it invigorated and gave me courage; when I was tempted to be disloyal, it reproached me with its simple faith.

Before we finally took leave of Gatcombe, a third letter arrived from Cecil. It contained an enclosure which was put by with the rest; it was the last communication which he sent for Ruth, since, in the mean time, he had heard from me that she had left Wayford without leaving her address; it was the last, too, that breathed of cheerfulness and hope.

"Don't fear for us," wrote he, "though I daresay the details of our adventurous life will astonish you. I always promised you that you should see my face again, and so you shall. In any case, you will have our bones, if the custom of the people hereabouts is adhered to in our case. The Indians among whom we are now staying" (there were other Europeans with them of both sexes, and a large escort) "live in villages built on posts above the water, which, though their architecture does not

remind one of Venice, are very picturesque. They 'bone' their deceased relatives in this way: the corpse is tied to a rope, and placed under water, and *in one day* the 'Caribe' fish strips it of every particle of flesh, and leaves it a clean-picked skeleton. Thereupon, they separate the bones with ease, and put them in highly ornamented baskets, of which the contents are so well calculated, that the skull just fits on the top of all like a lid. If the Monkton carrier, therefore, brings you a parcel, some fine morning, of a pyramidal shape, do not let Aunt Ben imagine it is a heath for her conservatory, and be dreadfully disappointed to find it is only myself or Jane. The survivor will make arrangements to have it carriage paid, as far as possible."

This ghastly drollery did not raise my aunt's spirits respecting Cecil, of whose wild enterprises she wholly disapproved; and she wrote him a long jobation upon the impropriety of taking his sister among people who lived on posts and boned their relatives; but for my part I thought he was using the best means for effacing painful recollections, and felt every confidence in Jane's ability to take care of herself. I had almost forgotten to say, indeed, that there were a few lines added by Jane herself, describing their mode of life as being very pleasant, and "my dearest Cecil," as looking quite himself again, "though I fear he is still worried about that girl at Wayford!" Their handwritings were so similar, that at first I took the whole letter to be from Cecil only.

In the late autumn, Aunt Ben and I removed to town. We stayed at first at a hotel, a mode of life which my aunt described as "simple ruination," and afterwards in lodgings, till we could find a house to suit us. The locality we finally patronised was on the western confines of that region which envy denominates Pimlico. It had,

however, no pretensions to fashion, nor, indeed, to form; for, although called Merton-square, it was a very irregular figure, with a wilderness of a public garden in the midst of it, which perhaps formed its chief attraction in our country-loving eyes. The house had also in its rear a little garden of its own, about ten feet square, in which Aunt Ben worked every morning in an apron fitted with a sort of opossum pouch—in which were kept scissors, and matting, and twine—and a great flapping sun-bonnet. She had no more idea of there being anything peculiar in her costume than had Eve in the garden of Eden; but we had neighbours (which Eve had not), who stared at her a good deal.

The novelty of our mode of life having worn off, and sight-seeing beginning to pall a little, I began to address myself to the pursuit of my proposed profession. From theatre-going my aunt had dropped off, gorged, after the first month; but I still continued to attend the performance of each new piece, in hopes to derive advantage from the lesson. I had, of course, everything to learn so far as stage business was concerned; but as respected the literary merits of these dramas—well, I was not discouraged by the sense of their surpassing merit. It was the beginning of the epoch of Sensation Plays, and the object of the dramatist seemed to be to employ the carpenter to the utmost, and of the actor to emulate the acrobat. Not content with holding the mirror up to nature, the playwright made use of nature herself: lovers were drowned in real water, and came before the curtain dripping, to express their acknowledgments for applause; when a tyrant's castle had to be destroyed, it was effected by *bonâ fide* fire, and the London Brigade were in attendance, to take care that it did not burn "the house" down as well as the castle. Elopements were effected in

yellow postchaises, and a stable was as necessary an adjunct to every theatre as a green-room. Even farce displayed its hansom-cab. Muscle and spring were the stock-in-trade of the tragedian; and country actors swarmed upon the London boards, to the exclusion of old favourites, because they could jump. Not only was Falstaff's occupation gone, but all fat actors had to Bant. The tariff of payment was regulated by the danger incurred in representing a part. *To climbing up outside tower, hand over hand,* 5*l.* 5*s.* *To falling headlong from the same, in flames,* 10*l.* 10*s.* If I had but thought of composing anything with the leaping-pole "effects" in it, which I used to exhibit at Gatcombe, I believe it would have been produced at once; but, unhappily, I stuck to the legitimate drama.

After some months of conscientious toil in the way of improvement and excision, I felt that I had put my best play into the best guise of which my powers permitted; and, after having had it carefully copied out by a professional hand, I sent it to the manager of the Corintheum. I fixed on this gentleman for my first victim, because he was not only the proprietor of a large theatre, but a great patron of dramatic art. No public dinner was ever held in its honour, or for the relief of its professors, but Mr. Magnus was in the Chair, or the Vice, or in some other conspicuous position. One of his stock speeches on such occasions, which was always greatly applauded, was an expression of thankfulness that he had been placed by Providence—and the courtesy of his noble friend (if he would allow him to call him so) the Lord Chamberlain—in a position to "hold out a helping hand" to his "brethren" of the sock and buskin; and in the word brethren he wished to be understood to include authors as well as actors; all young

aspirants to fame; the sucking (if he might be permitted the expression) Shakespeare as well as the budding Garrick. His hand was open to them all.

I had heard it said of Mr. Magnus, that if his hand was open there was never anything in it; but with that I did not concern myself; I did not want money for my play, but only a hearing.

Years have gone by since the date of which I speak, and managers and I have come to an understanding long ago; but even now the waiting and watching for news of that unhappy play still recur to me with a pang. Great Heaven! what must those poor wights, then, suffer who write plays for bread! In my country innocence, which identified the position of a great London manager with that of a gentleman, and in my ignorance of the depths of human selfishness, I construed the silence of Mr. Magnus as a sign that the *Pedlar's Pack* had been received with favour. If otherwise, thought I, I should surely have had a line to that effect, or the manuscript itself would have been returned to me. In the short note which I had sent with it, I had enclosed stamps for that very purpose; and valuable as I was ready to believe the time of Mr. Magnus was, I felt that he might have spared one minute to have addressed my precious manuscript to Merton-square, even if he could not have given five to its perusal. I say "five minutes," for if within that time a play does not attract its reader, he may be justified in giving himself no farther trouble; whereas, if it does attract him, it is not unreasonable to expect that he should go on. So I argued that Mr. Magnus had "gone on" with the *Pedlar's Pack*, and was more or less enraptured by it: so much so, it seemed, that he could not trust himself to say what he thought about it, far less to put his ideas in writing. Perhaps this good man

wished to give me a surprise, and would send me a short note of congratulation one fine morning, informing me that the first rehearsal would take place "that evening," and that in the mean time he was engaged in putting it on the stage with every appliance that money could purchase, to insure its success. Perhaps he would call in person in his wicked brougham—the "wicked brougham," however, was a subsequent idea, when I had got to know something more of Mr. Magnus. My feelings towards this eminent personage ran through the whole scale of opinion from veneration to undying hatred. I began by believing him to be a Mæcenas with the wit of Horace. I ended with having the same opinion of him that was entertained by his creditors in general, and the Hebrew race in particular.

After three months, I ventured to send him a courteous reminder that the *Pedlar's Pack* was in his esteemed possession; and that I should be thankful for any news concerning it. I did not expect to get an answer the next day, because it happened to be a great theatrical anniversary, upon which Mr. Magnus was advertised to fill the chair at a public banquet, and did fill it to admiration. I was there myself and admired him. When he observed, as usual, that he had been placed by Providence in a position to hold out a helping hand to dramatic authors, I almost imagined his benevolent eye was resting upon *me*. But he did not answer my letter the next morning; and when, a month afterwards, I wrote a more peremptory note, demanding to have my manuscript, dead or alive—that is, read or unread—he did not answer *that*. Then I cursed Mr. Magnus in the bitterness of my soul, and took my pigs—I mean the *Pedlar's Pack*—to another market.

CHAPTER XXII.

Accepted.

AFTER this unsatisfactory experience with the great autocrat of the British stage, I did not waste so much time in my attempts on other managers. Instead of "sitting down" before the fortress, and waiting in all due form until its gates should open, I pushed the siege with considerable vigour. Though the old-fashioned weapons of courtesy were certainly not used by the besieged, and were about as useless in my own case as bows and arrows against stone walls, I did not abandon them; but I no longer took it for granted that silence was a good sign; I even began to have an idea that it was a bad sign. And, unfortunately, it was the only sign the managers gave. I very much doubt whether in any other profession or trade in England such uniform discourtesy and selfishness are to be found as among this class, who have, unhappily, so many persons more or less dependent on their good-will; but, to be sure, I only tried about a dozen of them, and nearly as many were left untried. Moreover, my applications were not invariably treated with contemptuous silence. After the *Pedlar's Pack* had remained for two months in the possession of Mr. Quaver (of the Favourite Theatre), and I had twice requested its restitution, I received a—well—a communication, consisting of two letters and one word, written on the inside of an envelope: "Ms. lost," with the great man's initials, "P. Q.," attached to it—I suppose for authenticity, though I never had any reason to doubt his statement.

The gloom that settled upon me after this event I was unable wholly to conceal from Aunt Ben's observation.

"My dear Fred," said she, at breakfast one morning,

as I was perusing the columns of the *Era*, and wondering whether the *Pedlar's Pack* would ever be noticed in that respectable organ, "why don't you set Lady Repton at these horrible people?"

"*Eureka!*" cried I, jumping up from my seat.

"I'm what?" said my aunt sharply.

"You're right; you've hit it: you're a dear old thing!" exclaimed I with enthusiasm. "I'll write to her this very moment. Why on earth did you not suggest it to me before?"

My aunt did not reply, nor was it necessary for her to do so. I could easily imagine that nothing but the spectacle of my extreme chagrin and disappointment could have induced her to propose such a remedy. She had always disliked Lady Repton and what she termed her "art," meaning, not the profession in which she had distinguished herself in early life, but a certain faculty for making herself agreeable to the male sex, which was not, perhaps, wholly natural or unsophisticated. I, on my part, had by no means forgotten her; but I had never thought of using her influence in the way that my aunt suggested. Self-conceit had probably prevented my doing so. I had looked forward to writing to her upon the success of my first play, to thanking her prettily for the early encouragement and advice which had led to it, to asking her to come up to town, and see it acted; and now— Well, things had come to such a pass that I felt genuinely grateful to my aunt for a proposition which gave me some hope that my poor play would at least reach a manager's eye, though I was no longer sanguine enough to believe that there was not a great distance between that organ and the ear of an audience. So I wrote to Lady Repton, depicting my troubles, in Indian ink, and by no means sparing the authors of them.

She replied by return of post.

MY DEAR FRED,—I was charmed to hear from you, notwithstanding the melancholy character of your communication, and I am afraid I could not help laughing a little over your woes. By whose experience could you possibly have been misled to expect courtesy in the manager of a theatre? If you find one with common honesty, you will be exceptionally fortunate, believe me. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that they have no consideration for anybody; they have a considerable respect for two classes of their fellow-creatures—namely, noblemen and newspaper critics. The latter class are their tyrants, the former are the only superiors they acknowledge; and they cringe to both of them. It is not necessary that a titled person should be a patron of their establishment in order to insure their respectful attention; and I have no doubt that the enclosed note from my husband, if you choose to forward it to Mr. Magnus, will procure at least the restitution of your manuscript. Lord Repton bids me say he has "some little reputation" in dramatic matters, and if he were in town would be glad to assist you—I suppose in composition. For my part, I cannot be half the use to you that I wish to be. You know how long I have been absent from the scenes of my former triumphs; and, alas, there is nothing so short-lived as the memory of us poor artists, as it is now the fashion to call us—we used to be termed actors and actresses; but perhaps it is as well to have changed the name, since the thing, acting, is no longer to be found anywhere. What tales, by the bye, I hear of these burlesques. I hope it is true that the young ladies still retain some drapery on *one* leg; but such stories never lose in the telling. Well, the only acquaintance that re-

mains to me in managerial power is Mr. Coryton (of the Memnon)—twenty years ago, the best walking-gentleman in London, and the *only* gentleman (between ourselves) that *I* ever saw upon the stage: of course he only *plays* his character, and you will perceive a monstrous difference between his acting and his reality; but still, I think, for the sake of old times, he will treat any friend of mine with some show of attention, and an affectation of geniality which used to become him exceedingly, and won many a warm young heart, no doubt, besides my own. Heigh-ho, what am I saying! I shall write to Corydon (as I used to call him) by to-day's post, and spare you the trouble of introducing yourself. Of course I should like to read the *Pedlar's Pack*, and would gladly come the few hundred miles that lie between us to see it on the stage. I don't doubt its merits, but I hope there is a little time allowed in it, for the characters to change their costume. I remember how you used to ignore all "carpenters' scenes." To be sure the stage heroines of the present day wear but little, nor, I may add, that little long; but I daresay they require quite as much time for the toilet as of old. Besides Mr. Coryton, there is a Mr. Burder, by the bye, who used to be a great dramatic authority in my day. My husband once asked him down to shoot here, when there was some talk of a play of his lordship's being produced in London. Mr. B. had his shooting, and the play did not come out (for which I thank the gods), so the obligation lies (or appears to lie) upon his side; he may perhaps be inclined to work it off in your favour; at all events I enclose a note for him. You had better ask him to your house and "dine" him. He is tolerably presentable, and likes attention of that sort; but you must let him have a little whisky after dinner.

You say nothing of your Eleanor; that is bad, Master Fred. I am afraid you want some staid person like myself to look after you in the gay city; not that I would accuse your Aunt Ben of being light and frivolous, but that she probably spoils you, and lets you have your own way. I should have more confidence in the guardianship of Cousin Jane. I often think of that grim young female, and of your good plain Cecil's devotion to her. I am not the least surprised to hear that she has carried him off into savage regions; if he could only find a chief courageous enough to make her his squaw, it would be a happy day for him; and no doubt that is what she is after. But I forget: I am wounding your susceptibilities. She was not without a certain good taste, I allow.—So you have let the old house to Sir Richard Harewood. As lord of the manor, I should have thought you would have had more care for the morals of the villagers than to have admitted such a ne'er-do-well on your premises. Mr. Coryton could tell you a story or two about him; but there, you know I hate scandal. With my respectful compliments to your duenna—I conclude you are sufficiently a man of the world by this time not to leave your letters about—I am yours always devotedly,

ROWENA.

The effects of the intervention of this goddess on my behalf was twofold and immediate. Mr. Magnus became reminded of my existence to the extent of returning me my manuscript by the hands of a special messenger, and Mr. Coryton wrote me a few lines which filled me with gratitude and hope:

MY DEAR SIR,—A letter from my old friend, Lady Repton, informs me that you have a drama that merits

attention. I pass by Merton-square daily on my way to my duties here, and shall be happy to look in any day you may choose to appoint—early in the afternoon will suit me best, if that be equally convenient to yourself.—Yours faithfully,

EDGAR CORYTON.

The note was written upon pink paper, at the top of which the words "Memnon Theatre" were inscribed in gold.

"What do you think of *that*, Aunt Ben!" exclaimed I, exhibiting in triumph this highly-decorated epistle, which emitted a charming odour as I waved it in the air.

"It is very fine," said my aunt quietly, "and I'll keep it in my handkerchief case, if you will allow me, in place of a scent-packet."

"But is it not good of Mr. Coryton to come and see me in this friendly fashion, instead of making me dance attendance at the Memnon upon him?"

"It is very good of him indeed," said my aunt dryly. She was so prejudiced against dear Lady Repton, that I do believe she almost grudged me the good-fortune that had befallen me through her intervention. "I should think you had better ask him to lunch."

"Excellent idea!" cried I. "My dear aunt, you are a genius! Give him the best lunch that money can buy. I will tell him to name his own day, and"—here I hesitated, pen in hand—"most of these people have a habit of smoking after their meals—you wouldn't much mind his having a cigar here, would you?"

"Not at all, my dear. He shall have everything he wishes. I only regret I cannot execute a *pas seul* to please him"—my aunt had a fixed idea that a theatrical manager was a sort of Sardanapalus, always surrounded by meretricious splendour—"but whatever lies in my

power shall be done to please him. If I cannot charm his eye, I can at all events tickle his palate."

This was not a vain boast of my aunt's, and I had every confidence in the success of the luncheon. Mr. Coryton named an early day at two o'clock; and the appointed time found us waiting for him with eager expectation in the drawing-room, to which the most fragrant smell of costly viands was wafted from the kitchen.

"As we are to make this our dinner, Fred," observed my aunt, as she looked at her watch. "I do hope Mr. Coryton will be punctual."

"He said in his note of acceptance that he was a slave to punctuality," said I.

"Humph!" said my aunt. "It's ten minutes past two already; that curried lobster will be spoiled."

At twenty minutes past two, orders were given to "put back" the more delicate of the dishes.

At half-past: "There will be nothing for him to eat now but the plovers' eggs," said my aunt, with a resigned air. At a quarter to three, she observed solemnly: "Mark my words, Fred; that man won't come."

At three o'clock arrived a canary-suited footman with another little pink note, which, however, I no longer regarded with admiration.

"My dear sir," it ran, "I am in despair at not being able to lunch with you this afternoon. But I am suddenly called away to Richmond. When a lady's in the case—you know the rest of it. Perhaps we may be more fortunate in meeting one another some other time.—Yours ever,

"E. C."

"What an impudent scoundrel!" ejaculated I, as I nded over to my aunt this precious epistle.

"I don't think he can be such a *very* gentlemanlike person as Lady Repton gave you to understand," observed she dryly. "Well, let us go down to what is left of dinner." Which we accordingly did, though in my case there was but very little left of appetite.

This was the worst blow that my dramatic prospects had yet received. It was impossible to doubt that Mr. Coryton's "some other time" meant no time at all; and as I had been greatly elated by hope, so was I now cast down to the very depths of despair. Fortunately, I had already written to thank Lady Repton in anticipation for her introduction to this man, and there was no occasion to pain her (as I am sure it would have done) by telling her what had come of it. Moreover, there was one more string to my bow in her note to Mr. Burder; if *that* should snap, I made up my mind to give up shooting; for making a hit upon the stage was one thing, but making oneself a butt for managers was quite another.

The note to Mr. Burder was answered by that gentleman in person within twenty-four hours. He was a little corpulent man, with a red face and a black wig, and arrived in a miniature brougham, into which he exactly fitted. I was past transports by this time, but I welcomed him gladly, and thanked him for his prompt visit.

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Burder. "To be a friend of Lady Repton's is to have a passport to what remains of my heart. There was a time when she made dreadful havoc with it—yes, sir."

I told him how I had been treated by all those confounded managers, and he laughed till the tears rolled down his vinous cheeks. They were very highly coloured, and puffed out in places, as though he had had his mouth full of precious stones, which showed their gorgeous hues through the skin.

"You have got the right man at last," said he, "to do your work for you. You should have come to me at first. Ned Burder is hand and glove with every manager in London.—Would you like tickets for any theatre, madam?"—this to my aunt. "The free list is never suspended in my case. I've got half-a-dozen orders in my pocket at this moment."

"You're most kind," replied Aunt Ben warmly, always grateful for the smallest favour in her own case, though by no means so easily satisfied with what people did for her nephew. "I am not much of a playgoer in a general way, but if you can help Fred to get his drama brought out, I shall then accept your offer with infinite pleasure."

"Well, well, that shall be managed all in good time. Trust to Ned Burder; what man can do shall be done for our young friend.—Thank you; yes, I *do* take lunch, though it's not my principal meal."

If lunch was not Mr. Burder's "principal meal," it struck me, from his performance with his knife and fork, that he must have breakfasted very early; but the fact was, he used the phrase in the same sense that the lawyers use "without prejudice:" he wished it to be distinctly understood, that nevertheless and notwithstanding the feats he might exhibit in the way of appetite at midday, he was quite open to an invitation to dinner. His angling with this intent—when one got to know him—was a most amusing spectacle; and when he had quite securely hooked his fish, he would play it, as though it was really of no consequence whether he landed it or not. "Upon my life, I have no right to come. 'Sir William,' or 'my Lady D.,' I fear, are counting on me; but still—"

Here the fish would nearly get off.

"But if you have a previous engagement, Mr. Burder—"

"No, no, no," he would put in precipitately. "It was not *settled*, my dear sir, and this *is* settled. My word is passed, and I am yours for the evening."

On one occasion, when my aunt and I had shown some resolution in closing the dining-room door against him—I think for a whole week—he revenged himself very characteristically.

He called and lunched—for we could not stop *that*—and as he took his leave, observed with a smiling countenance: "Have you two good people any engagement for Tuesday, now?"

He had often promised us a box at the Opera, and I thought it was come at last; and Aunt Ben, who doted on music, though she turned her back upon the stage during the ballet, thought so too.

"No," said I, rather briskly; "we have no engagement."

"That's capital," said Mr. Burder. "Then I have a capital plan: *I'll come and dine with you*—and I tell you what—*I'll bring a friend with me.* He's a nephew of mine—just as Fred is of yours, madam—a Blue-coat boy. The fact is, I promised his father to take notice of him, and introduce him to good society; and what better opportunity can he have than to come here!"

If my poor father had been alive, he would certainly have compared this worthy to Solomon's Abra:

> "Burder was ready ere we called his name,
> And though we asked another, Burder came."

He took my drama away with him on the first day, under pretence of "looking it over," and kept it for months, undergoing "a few touches;" "little niceties, my dear friend" [he leaped from "my dear sir" to "my dear friend" at a bound], "which no genius, however great, can effect, but only one who has a thorough ac-

quaintance with stage business." My firm belief is that he never read one single line of the *Pedlar's Pack*. He avoided the subject as though it was a topic of exceeding delicacy, and when I pressed it, tapped his nose, corrugated his eyebrows, and whispered, like a stage villain: "All is well; we must have patience."

Of course, if there had not been much to like in this old reprobate—for indeed he amused us both exceedingly—he could not have imposed on me so long (for we believed in him for months); and even when the crisis came, I could not find it in my heart to be angry with him.

Mr. Burder had been dining with us (of course), and was partaking of his third glass of whisky-and-water after dinner, when I suddenly fell upon him with the inquiry: "Now, where is this play of mine to be brought out, Burder, supposing you ever finish your 'few touches'? Or is it not to be brought out at all? Come, I can bear the worst."

"Brought out? Of course it will be brought out, my dear young friend—that is, in time. All is well—"

"No; it is not," I interrupted him sharply. "I want to hear the truth. You promised me your advice six months ago. What is it? It's no use your laying your finger on your nose" (perhaps *I* had been taking whisky-and-water too, but I know I felt desperate); "you might just as well put your thumb to it, and spread your fingers out."

Mr. Burder was not at all angry. He nodded, affirmatively rather than otherwise, as much as to say that there was, no doubt, some considerable truth in that observation.

"Well, my dear boy, I have been thinking about your play for months, night as well as day, believe me, and the conclusion I have come to is *this*. I understand

the subject of stage representation thoroughly and practically, you see; it's not an affair of theory with me at all.—Would you mind cutting me one very thin slice of lemon? Your excellent aunt does it beautifully.—Thanks. —Where was I?—Yes, sir, my final advice to you is this. The best way of bringing out your drama—*you* can do it, you know; you are well connected; and you know lots of people that live in country-houses, and so on—*get an amateur company to play it for you*—get it noticed in the principal papers" [I thought of that hateful *Top*], "and send the notices in slip (I'll show you how) to the London managers."

I believe, to do justice to the intelligence of Mr. Burder, that this brilliant idea had only occurred to him on the spur of the moment, and that he was by no means sanguine of its favourable reception. But for my part I roared with laughter. The matchless impudence of this dramatic guide, philosopher, and friend of mine tickled me to the core.

"You don't think it feasible?" inquired Mr. Burder comically, and yet with the air of a man who has done his best. "You don't see your way?"

"Not quite," said I gravely. "I am deeply obliged to you for your advice, but I would not recommend you to repeat it up in the drawing-room. My aunt has an idea that you really proposed to be of service to me."

"Just so, my dear friend—just so. Well, I won't go up-stairs to-night. And look here, you won't tell her till this time to-morrow; promise me that?"

"Very good," said I: "I promise."

There was something of pathos in the old humbug's air that touched me. His life had been passed, I fancy, mostly among rogues and vagabonds, and Aunt Ben seemed to him as a firm rock in a quicksand, one whose

good opinion he really valued, and would have been loath to lose. He went away without fishing for an invitation—a convincing sign of his perturbed mental condition—and I never expected to see him again.

On the morrow, however, he returned in the highest state of excitement, and glowing like a peony in full bloom.

"My dear Fred," cried he, rushing into the morning-room where my aunt and I were seated, "it's done!—Congratulate yourself, excellent Miss Wray; congratulate your nephew! The play is accepted!"

"No!" said I, in genuine astonishment.

"Yes, sir; the *Pedlar's Pack* is accepted, and will be brought out immediately."

"Dear me, how pleased I am!" exclaimed Aunt Ben. "Kiss me, Fred.—Mr. Burder, I feel greatly obliged to you."

"Don't mention it, my dear madam. When I have once said: 'Trust to Ned Burder,' you may be assured that I see my way pretty clearly."

"But where is it coming out, my dear fellow?" inquired I with eagerness. "At what theatre?"

"Well," said Mr. Burder cheerfully, "it's not exactly a theatre; though, looked at from some points of view, it's even a better thing. It's a place that has been called the nursery of the British stage, where Biles, and Ram, and Spiffkins made their first appearance—and I have reason to believe also Garrick and Mrs. Siddons. Your play is coming out, my boy, immediately—think of *that*, *immediately!*—at the Hole-in-the-Wall in Southwark!"

"The Hole-in-the-Wall!" reiterated my aunt. "Why, it sounds like a public-house!"

"Well, you wouldn't have it a private house, my dear madam," remonstrated Mr. Burder cheerfully, "*would* you? It *is* a public-house for those who wish to eat,

drink, and be merry; but for the more ethereal spirits, who can appreciate wit and refinement, strong situations, and the best dramatic effects, there is a Hall of Amusement attached to it capable of holding three thousand people, without counting children in arms. The posters will be on all the hoardings in a week, Fred—think of *that*—in red, and green, and yellow! *For the Pedlar's Pack, by Frederick Wray, Esq., of Gatcombe*—yes, sir, we'll have *that;* they like a territorial title down in Southwark *—come early to the Hole-in-the-Wall!"*

CHAPTER XXIII.

My Patroness.

UPON the Lord Chesterfield principle of leaving your company at the moment you suppose you have made your most favourable impression upon it, Mr. Burder vanished while the green, red, and yellow posters were still flaming before our eyes, and the Hole-in-the-Wall looming vaguely as a Temple of Fame. We heard him laugh triumphantly in the passage, and bang the front door as though he would have emulated a royal salute, before we could quite bring our minds to bear on the situation. My aunt, indeed, seemed to wake up from something very like a dead-faint.

"He won't *really* put 'of Gatcombe' on those play-bills, will he, Fred?" inquired she despairingly. "Only just imagine it in connection with the—with the Hole-in-the-Wall! It is enough to make your poor father turn in his grave."

"I don't like it myself, Aunt Ben," said I, thinking of the general proposition; "but if it *does* hold three thousand people, I shall certainly have a large audience; and then you heard what he said about its being 'the nursery of the stage'?"

My aunt nodded, but scarcely in assent. I don't think she had a better opinion of the Hole-in-the-Wall on *that* account.

"I hope it will all turn out well in the end, Fred," she observed resignedly. "All I do beg is, that they may not put 'Wray of Gatcombe' on those playbills in green, and yellow, and red."

I promised that this should not be done, and she expressed herself as satisfied, though I knew very well what the dear old soul was thinking about the whole matter, and that the British drama was at a worse discount than ever, in her estimation. She dropped her knitting in her lap from time to time, and moved her lips in a slow mechanical way, as though she was trying to accustom them to utter the words "Hole-in-the-Wall" composedly —a feat, however, which she never accomplished. At times I would catch her glance turned covertly upon me, with a mournfulness that seemed uncalled for by the circumstances, disagreeable as they undoubtedly were. But Aunt Ben, though not averse to a chat, or even a discussion, had the golden gift of keeping silence on all embarrassing topics, a most rare and excellent thing in woman, and I set down her lugubrious air to the sole account of her sympathy with my dramatic misfortunes. Presently there was a scuffle at the letter-box, and that sharp ring at the bell which proclaims the postman's ire at having to wait.

"Well, I hope there is some good news to come, Fred," sighed Aunt Ben.

"There's plenty of it," remarked I, "at all events;" and certainly if the budget was to be estimated by its bulk, we had cause to congratulate ourselves. The packet that had defied the letter-box was from Cecil; and there nother letter also, in an unknown hand, which I

threw aside for the present. We had not heard from my cousins for months, and had been getting anxious about them, so that this communication was very welcome. To our great joy, we found that they had returned in safety to Europe, and were now in Switzerland, where they were mountaineering with great vigour. "Jane," wrote Cecil, "is more venturesome than I am—and you remember that *I* did not often refuse my leaps at Gatcombe—and excites the admiration of the guides." He enclosed their diary for the last few days, full of descriptions of glacier scenery and adventure, with which the graphic annals of the *Alpine Journal* have since made us all so familiar. It was a rich treat to Aunt Ben and me at that time. Of family matters, Cecil said little. I had already received from him a most touching letter (and Jane had written feelingly also), in reply to the news of my father's death: his kind heart had felt for me to the quick, though the same post had borne to him the intelligence of his own bereavement—if one might call it so—in the mysterious disappearance of Ruth from Gatcombe. "I have no fears except for her happiness," he had written, "for she is as honest as the day, and not easily misled; though it pains me to hear nothing of her, I know well that there is nothing but good to hear, and I am saved the pain of having to write again and again: 'We must have patience, Rue, and wait Fate's pleasure.' One comfort is, too, that she always knows where to find a friend in you. Your father dead; Ruth fled; and the mystery of Batty's crime uncleared up, and without hope of clearance, form a catalogue of woes indeed: while that last cloud sits on my life, Fred, I shall never, never return to England—perhaps to Europe; never see Ruth again. How could I ask her then—even if I knew where to find her—to think of me as I shall never cease to

think of her! May you never know, dear Fred, what it is to feel as I feel while I write these words. Forgive me for making you share even a portion of such wretchedness. I remember that *you* have to be patient too. But then," added he, with a grim pleasantry that seemed to have taken the place of his former high spirits, "you wear *your* Rue with a difference."

In the present letter, there was not one word of Ruth. That his passion for her was unchanged, I felt assured; nay, that it was its very intensity which kept him silent. As to the philosophy which he had so strangely exhibited at the news of her disappearance, I accounted for it not so much on the ground on which he himself seemed to put it, namely, his confidence in her fidelity and good sense, as because he was secretly not displeased that she had put it out of his power to write to her, what might well seem to him to be his duty to write—namely, that all attempts to discover the author of her brother's death having failed, and even been discontinued, he could no longer, in honour and in justice to herself, consider their engagement as binding.

Aunt Ben, on the other hand, conceived that the absence of any mention of Ruth in Cecil's letter was a sign that time was doing its work with him as respected his "unfortunate attachment," and that he was "getting over it." She pointed out how in his last letter he had hinted of never returning to Europe, and now his very next communication was dated from Switzerland. "Mark my words, Fred: your cousin will be in England in six months; nor should I be surprised if he then 'settled down,' and married respectably."

As it happened, had we each been allowed ten thousand guesses we should neither of us have in the least foreshadowed Cecil's destiny; but that did not prevent us

from settling the matter to our respective satisfactions, and disagreeing with one another very much.

We were so intent upon Cecil and his affairs, that I had quite forgotten the letter that had arrived with his own, until the servant came to take away the breakfast-things, and found it unopened beside my plate. It was but a tiny note, the address of which seemed to have been written either by a child, or a person just beginning to write what is called "a running hand," and I turned it over with my fingers in some curiosity. "Who on earth can this be from, Aunt Ben?" said I, for I had no secrets from her, and it always pleased her to be appealed to, even on the smallest matters.

"I should think, my dear," replied she, scrutinising it with gravity, "that it must come from the manager—or the manageress—of the Hole-in-the-Wall: if it had been sealed with a thimble or a red wafer, I should have been sure of it.—Who *does* it come from? You seem quite interested in the contents, at all events."

"My dear aunt," cried I excitedly, "it's the best news I have had since I came up to town! It is from Miss Brabant, the new actress, of whom we have heard Mr. Burder speak so enthusiastically. We were to have gone and seen her ourselves, you remember, only you would not go to that detestable Mr. Magnus's theatre, you said, to see anybody or anything."

"But what has Miss Brabant to do with *you?*" inquired my aunt, with a marked absence of enthusiasm.

"Nothing with me, aunt; but she will have a great deal, I hope, to do with the *Pedlar's Pack*. She can bring out anything she likes, and she may like my play, you see. She has doubtless heard of it from Mr. Burder. Now I think of it, he did promise to speak to her about it; but I attach no importance to a word he says, and it

had escaped my memory. She writes a very polite letter, I assure you."

"The handwriting is peculiar," observed my aunt coldly; "that is, to judge from the address, which is all that I have seen of it."

I knew Aunt Ben's little prejudice so well, that I had made up my mind not to show her the letter, though its contents were very innocent, and to treat it as a mere matter of business; but her last hint was so very broad, that I could not ignore it. "This is all that is in the note," said I: "Miss Brabant (of the Corintheum Theatre) presents her compliments to Mr. Frederick Wray, and having understood that he is desirous to bring out a drama on the stage, would be glad to have half-an-hour's conversation with him upon that subject, any afternoon he may please to appoint."

There was such a silence in the room when I had read aloud these simple lines, that I could hear my aunt knitting.

"Does this—lady—write from the theatre?" inquired she presently.

"No; from her private residence—Laburnum Villa, N.W."

My aunt only replied "O!" but it was not one of those *O's* which stand for nothing.

I had always credited Aunt Ben with great good sense, and this behaviour of hers disappointed as well as distressed me. Of course she was not playing the prude upon her own account: if I had been her husband, she would have dispatched me to Laburnum Villa with confidence, and had the distance been sufficient to demand such refreshment, would have cut me sandwiches for the journey with her own hands. But in the interests of Eleanor she outdid Argus, and had a microscopic eye

for the arts of her sex and her nephew's perils. At the same time, as I have said, she never argued; and except for that single "O," and a silent protest in her manner, I met with no obstruction from Aunt Ben to visiting Laburnum Villa.

I went thither that very afternoon, with a heart beating higher than it had done yet with hopes of dramatic success. Miss Brabant, although a new addition to the London stage, was a star of considerable magnitude; and stars, I knew, could do what they liked with managers. The *Pedlar's Pack*, it was true, was now bespoken, but that did not so much matter, since there was no part in it quite adapted for this young lady; I had several other dramas in my desk, and one, the *Foot-page*, contained just the character to suit her: in tights and a violet doublet, she should come out in *that*, and take all London, with the trifling exception of Aunt Ben, by storm. But though I ventured to draw this perhaps too familiar portrait of "the Brabant," as I had heard Mr. Burder call her, I felt not a little awed as I neared the residence of the original.

A very pleasant semi-detatched house was Laburnum Villa, standing in quite a garden of its own, with two of those "dropping-wells of fire" in it from which it derived its name, and with boxes full of flowers at every story. A charming young person was looking over the blind of the dining-room, who might herself have been the arbitress of my dramatic fortunes, for all that I knew; and from the open windows of the first floor, a flood of melody, from voice and instrument, poured down upon me, as I stood on the top step and waited for the door to open, not without some misgivings as to my reception, like the Peri at the gate of Paradise; for now that I was here, and had rung the bell, it began to strike me for the first

time that there was something rather queer about that invitation, after all; not, of course, in the sense in which my aunt had taken it—though, if she had seen Laburnum Villa, her prejudices would, without doubt, have been fortified, since it was far too tasteful a dwelling to look "respectable"—but in the genuineness of Miss Brabant's letter. Was it not quite as probable that it was altogether a hoax, as that a young lady in her position should have troubled herself to have written to an unknown writer about a manuscript play? It would have been strange even in a manager to have done so; and, indeed, from what I knew of managers, they were about as likely to send me a blank cheque on their bankers without value received, as to perform such an act of patronage. Nor was there a character in the *Pedlar's Pack*, as I have said, which could have been pointed out as especially suited to her abilities.

However, it was too late to think of these matters now; I had rung the bell, and it was answered by the same lovely being whom I had seen patronising nature over the window-blind. To my inquiry as to whether Miss Brabant was at home, she first said "Yes," then, with a glance at a man's hat on the hall table, corrected herself hastily, and said "No;" finally, she ushered me into the dining-room, and bid me stay there while she ran upstairs "to see." I took great care to put my card into her hand, that there might be no farther mistake, if there should chance to be one already, and waited accordingly. I heard the music cease with suddenness in the drawing-room, and presently a man's step coming down the stair—a slow determined one, like that of a man who carries a horse-whip. Through the half-shut door I caught a glimpse of his face—thin, bearded, and aristocratic—as he went out, unlike a guest, without attend-

ance from the servant. He was evidently the master of the house. Miss Brabant had on some pretence got rid of her friend and protector—perhaps a duke—in order to give me my promised interview. The next moment, I was ushered into the drawing-room. It was empty, save for the elegant and costly furniture with which it was crowded, and the mirrors that multiplied each object of beauty, though on the open piano still lay the unfinished piece of music, a song from the play then running at the Corintheum. On the table were half-a-dozen of those large luxurious volumes such as are only seen in the houses of very rich or very improvident people, full of rivulets of description and meadows of engravings. I was engaged in examining one of them when the door opened, and in came, or rather swam, my hostess—a splendidly beautiful young woman, with a profusion of jet-black hair, the contrast of which to her complexion, which was as fair and delicate as a lily, was most striking and peculiar.

"Mr. Wray, I believe," said she, with a graceful courtesy. "You are better acquainted with me, probably" (here she seated herself, and smiled good-naturedly), "than I with you."

Of course, she referred to her performances on the stage, to which it was certainly in the highest degree improbable, considering my proposed profession, that I should not have been a witness.

"I have certainly seen you somewhere before, Miss Brabant," said I, bewildered by a little host of recollections of fair women, which I in vain endeavoured to marshal; "though not, I am ashamed to say, upon the stage. Where could it possibly have been?"

The pet of the Corintheum smiled again, but not so good-naturedly as before.

"Perhaps it was some one else of whom I remind you."

"You are very kind to some one else to say so," said I gallantly; "but to mistake another for yourself is hardly possible."

"That is a very pretty speech, sir; but not a prettier one than you owe me for having had the hardihood to confess that you never saw me act."

The arch tone and artificial laugh were new to me; I listened in vain for some familiar note which should dissolve the mystery of her identity. In this mental maze, I had almost forgotten what my fair companion had said, till an angry pout on her pretty lips recalled it to my memory. Then I hastened to explain to her how it was that I had hitherto debarred myself from the pleasure of seeing her on the boards of the theatre through detestation of Mr. Magnus.

"So you hate old Mag, do you?" said she comically. "Well, then, we have already something in common between us."

"But I thought—"

Then I stopped suddenly, with a blush, for I saw that her eye had caught mine as it mechanically moved over the costly appointments of the apartment.

"You thought that I was his debtor," observed Miss Brabant coolly, "and therefore his friend? A dramatist should know better than to identify the two relations. As it happens, however, I am neither. I came up to town with little or no reputation as an actress, and called on the great man, who at once recognised what he was pleased to call 'my talents.' Now he is angry with me, I hear, and says that my face was my fortune. Well, if so, it has been his fortune also. If he gave me a helping hand, I have filled it for him.—So he treated you ill, did he, about your play?"

I poured into her dainty ear my woes, making as

merry with them, however, as I could. At Mr. Coryton's letter, pleading his Richmond engagement as an excuse for not coming to luncheon, she laughed heartily.

"How like the vain old creature!" cried she. "Why, that was *me!*"

"Dear *me!*" said I, like an echo, and before I could stop myself.

"O yes; I remember it quite well. There were fourteen of us engaged to an early dinner—except on Sundays, you know, we poor actors cannot dine late—at the Star and Garter; and just at the last, one failed us, when Mademoiselle Agile (the great dancer, you know), who is a *dévote*, and very superstitious, refused to go unless we could procure a *quatorzième;* so I sent for old Cory."

"O, I see," said I.

It was somehow a great relief to me to hear that there had been twelve other persons at that Richmond dinner beside Miss Brabant and that fellow Coryton.

Then we began to talk of Mr. Burder, from whom, it seemed, she had first heard of my being a writer of plays.

"It was very good of him to mention it," laughed she; "for, you know, he writes for the stage himself."

"*He* write!" cried I. "Impossible!"

"I said he wrote *for* the stage, Mr. Wray—anybody can do that; I don't say that a play of his was ever accepted. Not that he is by any means a stupid man—indeed he is very amusing; but he is the greatest bore and nuisance with his rejected manuscripts that you can imagine."

"But how was it, then, may I ask," said I, "that this unpromising advocate of mine contrived to enlist your sympathies for my unhappy case, which you denied to his own?"

Miss Brabant blushed, and hesitated.

"Well, perhaps—"

Where *had* I seen her before? Where *had* I heard those tones, which, for an instant, I seemed so positively to recognise? She said something laughingly, I believe, about having a fancy to play the patroness to a young Sheridan, if not a Shakespeare; but I did not pay much attention, being occupied with the riddle that was perplexing me. She went on, however, to ask point-blank to see the *Pedlar's Pack*. I had taken the precaution to bring a copy of it in my pocket, as the best example of my dramatic efforts. She read a page or two with such evident satisfaction that, for fear she should throw away her praises, I mentioned, not without a blush of humiliation, that it had been bespoken within the last twelve hours for the Hole-in-the-Wall.

"How on earth came that about?"

"Well," said I, more humiliated by her amazement than ever, "I can hardly tell you. It was Mr. Burder's doing. He seemed to expect me to be grateful; and, indeed, according to his own account, he has really taken great pains."

"That's all rubbish, Mr. Wray," exclaimed Miss Brabant. "He has simply answered an advertisement in the *Era*, and sold your play for five shillings a night, or given it away altogether. He has done you a great injury, or I am much mistaken. Who introduced you to this man?"

"Well, the same person who wrote in my favour to Mr. Coryton—but I forgot, I did not tell you: it was the once famous actress, Lady Repton." Quick as thought, and at the very instant my lips formed the name, the association of ideas between Lady Repton, Gatcombe, and my fair hostess was a perfect chain. I think she

read my recognition of her in my eyes, for she smiled after her own natural fashion before I could stammer out the words: "Why, you are Ruth Waller!"

"Not yet, Master Fred," said she.

Then, stepping to a mirror, she removed the mass of raven hair that concealed her own golden tresses, and came forward in her own proper person—far more beautiful, I thought, than in her assumed guise—with both her hands held out in welcome.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Aunt Ben has "a little Surprise" for me.

My first thought, as I looked at Ruth, and while I still held her hands in mine, was: "What would poor Cecil give to be in my place?" She had always been very beautiful, but her beauty—as happens with most blondes—was not of that sort which unadorned is adorned the most. Art—by which I mean the arts of elegance and fashion—had heightened it to an extraordinary degree, and yet she had not lost her honest country look; her smile had the old sunshine in it still, and not the limelight.

"So it was to shine in London that you left us all in darkness at Gatcombe, was it, Ruth?"

"Yes, Master Fred," said she quietly. "It was the example of your Lady Repton that tempted me to try my fortune on the stage. I could not live on at Wayford, you know; I could not be a burden on—on Mr. Cecil all my life; and since he had taught me something—all I know, indeed, that is worth anything—of how to speak a speech—I resolved to gain a hearing."

"And you have put out your talent to some interest, Rue."

"You mean that I get money?" said she simply. "Well, yes, I do; but I had money to begin with—Mr. Cecil's—or else I doubt not matters would have been very different. If I had come to Mr. Magnus poor—" She shuddered, and broke off. "But I was rich, or seemed to be so; and he was pleased to say he thought that I should suit him, and would draw. And I *did* draw, you see."

"Yes, Rue, and you don't paint," said I admiringly, "which does you great credit. You seem to me just the same simple kindly girl you were at Wayford—"

"Then I must be indeed an actress born," interrupted she with bitterness. "Don't think it, Master Fred; don't think me 'simple,' nor a girl, at all; I am a woman grown, that knows, too, how to hold her own against—her friends. God help all women such as I who don't! 'Kindly,' you said too. Well, perhaps I am: there may be something left of heart about me; but surely I should have been something less than kind, and lower, if, when I heard *your* name, and felt that it might be within my poor power to help you on the path that you have chosen, I had not written to say so. Your visit here is like a breath of fresh air from the high moor at Gatcombe!"

In such a tone of disappointment and dejection were these words of welcome spoken, that a suspicion vague and chill began to steal over me, the influence of which I could not resist.

"The air is pure *here*, is it not, Ruth?" said I with significance.

"Why ask that question?" inquired she angrily. Then added: "But I forgot: you have a right. Well, you may tell your cousin he has no cause to be ashamed of me. What made you think he had?"

"Nothing," said I hesitatingly.

"Yes, there was: come, be frank with me."

"Well, I had no idea, of course, that this was *your* house; and I did think it strange—though indeed it was no stranger than my own presence here—to find a gentleman—"

"I see," she laughed out merrily. "Well, that was my music-master. I am quite ignorant of such things, of course, and Mr. Magnus says it is necessary to learn a song or two. Is there any other count against me, Master Fred?"

"*Against* you? No," said I. "But do you think Cecil would approve of your being an actress at all, Ruth?"

"I don't know, Master Fred." She looked exceedingly embarrassed; her quick flow of words at once deserted her, but she spoke firmly enough, like one whose course of conduct has been decided upon. "I don't know if he would or not; but how *could* I remain dependent on his bounty when I might never be his wife? He told me that himself at parting; and now—since nothing has been discovered down at Gatcombe—our union is farther off and more doubtful than even then."

"But why did you leave Wayford without letting me know your address, Ruth?"

"Well, that was wrong," said she; "but I was ashamed—not of going upon the stage—but lest I should fail; and when I had succeeded" (she hung down her head), "I was still ashamed."

"Then if you had not chanced to hear of me and of my play, you would have remained 'Miss Brabant,' and never revealed yourself at all?"

"I cannot say. Don't press that: let it suffice that when I saw an opportunity to help you, I did not resist it; indeed, I could not. It is dreadful to be quite alone in the world, Master Fred. Quite alone," she added, with a bitter smile, "and yet among so many friends!"

[illegible] three letters for you, Ruth, that should [illegible] delivered long ago: I was to have forwarded [illegible]

"Have you no recent ones?" interrupted she.

"How should I have, when I had informed him you had disappeared?"

"True. But he has written to *you* recently, has he not?"

"Yes; only yesterday, as it happens, though after a long interval of silence. He is in Switzerland."

"What! coming home?" cried she, almost, as it seemed to me, in alarm.

"I think not, though my aunt, with whom I am now living, as Mr. Burder doubtless told you, is of the contrary opinion."

"And what does he say of me *now*?"

Here it was my turn to feel embarrassed; for, as I have said, Cecil had not even mentioned her name in his last letter. "Well, you see, it was useless his saying much, since—"

"I see," interrupted she with gravity; "he says nothing."

"But his first letters, Ruth, were full of you, and I have no doubt that those of which I have charge are laden with his love. I will send them to you this evening."

"It is no matter," said she quietly; "for I shall not read them." I looked astonished, and she added pathetically: "Why should I do so, Master Fred? A love that is blighted and can never ripen, is a dead love. Why should I wound my heart afresh, all to no purpose?"

"But it *may* ripen, Ruth: time smooths all things but its own wrinkles. My cousin will not always feel so deeply the poison of that cruel accusation which Batty left within him, like a bee's sting, before he died."

Ruth shook her head, not despondingly, but in absolute negation.

"Well, time alone can show it," said I. "Jane describes her brother as being decidedly more cheerful."

"His sister is still with him, then?"

"Of course; he clings to her more than ever in his loneliness and anxiety about yourself."

Deep in thought, Ruth remained silent for a space; then with tender earnestness inquired: "Will you grant me, for the sake of old times, dear Master Fred, one favour?"

"Most certainly," said I. "What is it?"

"Do not mention to Mr. Cecil that you have found me."

"As you please," said I; for Cecil's last letter made silence on this point comparatively easy to observe. "But you will let me tell Aunt Ben?" This I stipulated for, since otherwise I should scarcely have been able to explain my visit to Laburnum Villa satisfactorily.

"Yes, you may tell your aunt."

Then I rose to go, for our interview had been a long one.

"I will keep your play, Master Fred; and shall be glad to read the other of which you spoke. There is just one thing more—you have never mentioned Miss Eleanor."

"If I have not," said I, smiling, "it was only because my mind was occupied with your affairs. She is quite well, and at Gatcombe."

"And all is well between you?"

"Yes, indeed. Why should you ask?"

"Because I knew your answer would make me happy. Well, you should have no secrets from one another, and you can tell *her* too that I am Ruth Waller. She will not shrink from me because I am a play-actress, as your Aunt Ben will do. If she were here this moment, she would take my hand, and—and pity me, as she was wont to do in those sad days at Gatcombe. But there, I have

to play Florella in two hours' time, and must not have red eyes.—Good-bye, and thank you, Master Fred."

"Good-bye, Ruth, and thank *you*."

Not till I left Laburnum Villa, and was on my way home alone, did the strangeness of my late discovery strike me with its full force. That Ruth should have gone on the stage, and succeeded upon it, did not astonish me so much when I called to mind the change that had been already apparent in her during our last interview at Wayford; that she should not have revealed her purpose while its accomplishment was doubtful, was also explicable enough; but when she had gained her object—had, indeed, been eminently successful, and that, as she assured me (and I did not doubt her), without loss of self-respect—why *then* she had not written to say, "I am well and prosperous, Master Fred—tell Mr. Cecil," was a mystery I could not unravel. For I was no longer of opinion that Ruth did not love my cousin; it seemed to me, on the contrary, that she was apprehensive of loving him too much, and in vain. If she did not care for him, why should she have expressed her resolve not to read those long-delayed letters, without doubt so full of passionate ardour, and have forbidden me to inform him of her calling or place of abode? Like Cecil himself, she probably believed their union to be hopeless, though not on the same grounds. I had never heard from her (though Cecil had said something about her entire acquiescence in his view of the matter) that Batty's accusation against my cousin, so long as it remained disproved, was in *her* eyes also an insuperable bar to their union; but it was likely enough that from what she knew of his character, she foresaw that it would prove so. Moreover, it struck me, from the half-resentful tone in which Ruth had said, "His sister is still with him, then?" that she

gave my Cousin Jane more credit than she deserved as another source of opposition to their union Jane had, in reality, no power in the matter (though, if she had, she would have undoubtedly used it like a wedge to separate them); and should the mystery of Richard Waller's catastrophe be discovered, I felt certain that no argument would for a moment detain Cecil from flying to his beloved's arms. To Ruth, however, it doubtless seemed that even if time should lessen the proportions of that obstacle which constantly presented itself to Cecil's sensitive mind, or even remove it altogether, there was always an enemy of hers at his right hand to interpose new impediments.

And yet, having arrived at all these sage conclusions, I was obliged to confess to myself that Ruth's conduct was an enigma still. It was, perhaps, to get rid of the profitless speculations that filled my mind with regard to her, that I sketched out for myself a little amusement with Aunt Ben, as respected my visit to Laburnum Villa. Since she had treated poor Miss Brabant, and indeed myself, with such undeserved distrust, it was only just that she should be punished a little. I was strengthened in this determination by finding my esteemed relative by no means recovered from her suspicious state of mind, but maintaining a stately reserve, under which it was easy to detect a most vehement curiosity. She would probably have had her tongue cut out, rather than ask the question: "Well, and what about that wicked woman?" but if it had been, that inquiry would certainly have been found upon the tip of it.

"My dear aunt," cried I with enthusiasm, "she's charming!"

"*Who's* charming?" replied Aunt Ben sharply, and knitting with great rapidity.

"Why, Miss Brabant, of course."

"I don't want to hear about it, if she is."

"O, but I *must* tell you," said I. "You have no idea how kind she has been to me. She has not the least nonsense or *mauvaise honte* about her."

Here my aunt muttered: "No *honte* of any kind, I daresay;" but I affected not to hear her.

"I don't think I ever saw anybody but Nelly so pretty —her black hair was just like Nelly's; and I do believe she will bring out my *Foot-page* at the Corintheum, and play the principal part herself, in tights. Never was such a piece of good fortune; I— Why, what's the matter, aunt? You surely don't think that I've fallen in love with the woman? Why, what on earth is there to cry about? What's happened? What's the matter?"

For, to my horror and amazement, Aunt Ben had suddenly dissolved in tears, and was now sitting, with bowed head, and her work fallen on the ground, looking an older woman by ten years than I had yet known her.

"Nothing has happened that was not to have been expected, I suppose," sobbed she. "Your poor father used to say that men were all alike when flattered by a wicked woman; he had one exception in his mind, however, and there he was wrong. It will break Nelly's heart, I know, and it has nearly broken mine. I had such confidence in you, Fred, and now— Well, Nelly is coming up to us, and she will judge for herself. As for me, I wash my hands of it altogether;" and she wrung her withered palms as though she had already done so, and was drying them in the air.

"Nelly coming up to town," cried I, "and to *us!* Why, when did you know that?"

"What does it matter?" sobbed my aunt, "when you will be half your time at Laburnum Villa, or rehearsing

things at the theatre with this abandoned young person in—tut—tut—tights."

"My dear aunt," said I gravely, "this has gone too far. You were mistaken in the whole matter from the first, and out of a little revengeful malice, I did not undeceive you. But the fact is, that this Miss Brabant is no other than Cecil's young woman, Ruth Waller."

And in a few words I told her all. She listened with great interest, and when I had finished, seemed never tired of putting questions on her own account. "You shall hear everything in time," said I at last; "but tell me first about Nelly's coming to town."

"Ah, but suppose she isn't coming," said my aunt. "If you play tricks on me, why should not I on you?"

If Aunt Ben was joking, her merriment was of a very ghastly kind, and even a little hysterical as well. I felt certain that not only was Nelly coming, but that something very serious had occurred to induce her to do so.

"If there is news from Gatcombe, let me know it, aunt," said I; "you have no right to keep it from me."

"Well, Fred, there *is* news, and great news; but whether it be good or not is another question. But first, let me ask, have you noticed nothing peculiar in the tone of Eleanor's letters of late?"

"They have seemed to me to be written with effort," said I; "not, of course, as regards their affectionate warmth, but their cheerfulness. She tries to make the best of herself; but her long separation from us, and the being shut up alone with that hateful old man at Gatcombe, appear to tell upon her more and more."

"And that is all," murmured Aunt Ben, half to herself. "O Fred, you little know what that dear creature has been suffering!"

"Is Nelly ill?" cried I. "What *do* you mean?"

"Yes; ill in mind, Fred—sick at heart. Persecuted by him who was bound to be her protector, she has confided in me alone, because, if you had known of it, matters would have been made worse. You would have gone to Gatcombe, carried her off under the old man's nose, and probably kicked Sir Richard."

"Kicked Sir Richard Harewood? Kicked our tenant?"

"Yes, because he has been making love to Eleanor. —There, now, I knew you would put yourself in a tantrum. It's no use your snatching up your hat and stick. The matter is now arranged, and Sir Richard has got his *congé*. But poor Nelly's position has been making me miserable for weeks. I did not like to tell you of it, partly for the reason I have mentioned, and partly because I saw you were so depressed about your play. Every morning I said to myself: 'I will tell him to-day;' and every day something occurred with Mr. Burder—or did not occur—which put you in bad spirits. 'What is the use of making him more miserable than he is,' thought I, 'when any remedy he may take in his own hands would only make matters worse?' Yesterday I was on the very point of telling you; and then that news about the Hole-in-the-Wall came, and I hadn't the heart to do it. Even when this Miss Brabant wrote to you, and it seemed to me that you were about to fall into the net of a bold and forward young person, I still hesitated, since Eleanor had laid on me such strict injunctions to keep her secret; but when you came home to-night, and talked of that undesirable acquaintance so enthusiastically (you naughty boy, to take in your poor old aunt!), then I said to myself: 'How *can* he, *can* he do so? O, if he only knew that his own Eleanor was coming to town!' —and then I told you," added my aunt quietly.

"But you haven't told me, Aunt Ben, or at least only

enough to make me anxious." And, indeed, when I began to couple this news with the significant way in which Ruth had inquired whether all was well between myself and Eleanor—doubtless with reference to this Sir Richard Harewood, better known (as I was well aware) than spoken of in theatrical circles—it was natural enough I should feel anxious. He was quite capable, from what I had heard of him, of persecuting a girl with his attentions, however unwelcome they might be.

"Well, Frederick," said Aunt Ben gravely, "the long and short of the matter is, that that dreadful old Mr. Bourne has been throwing Eleanor at Sir Richard's head. He always liked a title dearly; and no doubt it would have been an additional satisfaction to him if he could have secured a baronet for a son-in-law, and at the same time got you jilted."

"What an old villain!" ejaculated I.

"Yes, but fortunately also what an old fool!" continued Aunt Ben. "The way he went to work was the very course most fitted to disgust his grand-daughter, and make her take another view of what she had hitherto considered to be her duty as regarded himself. She wrote to me a week ago, that she had told her grandfather that if Sir Richard came to the rectory again, she should leave his roof, and throw herself upon my protection; and as for his money, she frankly told him he might give it to whom he pleased. This indifference to her inheritance must, I suppose, have seemed incredible to the old wretch, or perhaps he doubted her determination; but, at all events, he permitted the baronet to pay another visit; and yesterday, Nelly wrote to say she's coming."

"When?" cried I excitedly. "O, when?"

"Well, in a day or two. In time to see your play at the Hole-in-the-Wall: and certainly, in time to see the

other—at the what do you call it?—in which your beautiful Miss Brabant is to act in tights, sir."

But I was too much excited and delighted by Aunt Ben's news to feel her satire.

"Dear Fred," continued my aunt with increased gravity, "this is all my doing as respects Eleanor coming hither, for at the first hint of her trouble I invited her; and I do hope that you will not give me cause to repent it. I trust to your good feeling not to use your influence to precipitate a marriage. She will have left her grandfather, it is true, for good and all, as she thinks; and he will have told her that his wealth will now pass into some other channel; and perhaps he is really bent on carrying out that design. But, on the other hand, he may not be so; or if his threat of disinheritance is put in effect for the present, the ties of blood grow stronger as we approach our end, and at the last his heart may turn towards her. He cannot live for ever. And remember, Fred, however indifferent you yourself may be as to whether your wife comes to you as a great heiress or empty-handed, there are others to be considered in this matter; not only Eleanor herself, of whose simplicity we must not take advantage, but also those unborn, who may one day reproach you both for a selfish precipitation. Your motto, therefore, must still be, 'Wait and hope.'"

"So be it," said I eagerly; "it will be happiness enough for the present to see her here under our own roof." And, indeed, I spoke the truth, for this unexpected news had fairly transported me. But, on the other hand, it made me nervous and apprehensive, as the promise often does of a pleasure that seems almost too great to be realised. Although I knew that Nelly was not one to be intimidated, or to be kept in sub-

jection unless from a sense of duty, and that all folks around Gatcombe were her friends, and would be, if necessary, her helpers, I was consumed by vague forebodings. The sunshine of Hope was with me, and was also, I well knew, with my darling, but there loomed a dark cloud above the intervening space, which seemed to menace Hope's fruition. Such presentiments of evil are common enough, but seldom verified; and when they are so, the misfortune which we dread comes as often as not from some quite unexpected quarter, and fills us all the more with terror and dismay.

CHAPTER XXV.

Bad News.

In spite of my forebodings, Nelly arrived safe and sound in Merton-square, and filled our house with sunshine. There is, however, no need to paint my raptures, since the intention of this history is to describe not my own life, but only so much of it as is (directly or indirectly) connected with my cousin Cecil. Let it suffice to say that we were supremely blessed in one another's company, and that the contemplation of our happiness used to affect Aunt Ben so sympathetically, that she would often burst into tears. We were rather gay than otherwise, for London was as new to Nelly as it had been to me, and its most ordinary amusements afforded her great pleasure. We went pretty often to the theatres, and it quite vexed me to see how she enjoyed the performances, with their hansom cabs, their real Firemen, and the *bonâ fide* Well into which the villain of the piece fell backwards with an audible splash. Of course we went to see Miss Brabant act, and all acknowledged that she looked splendidly; but my two companions were rather cold in

their encomiums of her talent. I am sure that my aunt did her best to prejudice Nelly against Ruth, and I think in part succeeded. There were no questions asked about my visits to Laburnum Villa, so obviously necessary in connection with my drama of the *Foot-page*, which Miss Brabant had promised to have brought out; and any details of such interviews with which I favoured them were received with but a languid interest. I know it would have given Ruth an intense pleasure—and something more—if Nelly had gone to see her; but when I asked her to do so, she had replied: "Yes, dear Fred, if you wish it very much;" and, though I was not yet a married man, I knew what *that* meant.

Ruth never reproached her with this conduct—the offspring not of Pride, of course, but of Aunt Ben's Prudence—nor ceased to speak of her with the utmost gratitude and respect; but it wounded her deeply, and I fear in the end did her grievous harm. It made her feel more than ever that she was cut off from the wholesome side of life, and tended to attach her to that undesirable society among which she had hitherto moved without absolutely belonging to it. My remonstrances with Aunt Ben upon this point were fruitless. She "had nothing to say against Ruth's character (she was sure), but the young woman had chosen a path for herself of which she, for her part, could in no way approve." As to the argument, that she should do her best for her, for Cecil's sake, "it was for his very sake that she wished to have no relations with her; when he came home, it was to be hoped that he would be in his right mind, and any intimacy on our part was to be deprecated which was likely to bring his old delusion to his recollection."

Aunt Ben was one of those admirable women who have no parallel in the opposite sex for kindliness, self-

sacrifice, and good sense—and whose determination not to listen to reason, where their prejudices are concerned, is impregnable.

It was within less than three weeks of Nelly's arrival, that as we three were walking over Southwark-bridge one afternoon, we had to stand aside close to the balustrades while six men went by us, each bearing an immense letter on a placard, and with *To-night* in characters of blood upon their chests, instead of a waistcoat.

"What *does* that mean?" asked Nelly.

"It's some advertisement of a music-hall or a play," said I carelessly. "If you read the letters—supposing the men were in their proper order, which does not always happen—you would get the name of the performance."

"But I did read them, Fred, and that's what gave me such a sürprise. It was the word *Pedlar*, and that—"

In an instant, like one, most literally, "in hot pursuit of Fame," I was running after the men with placards. My worst suspicions were realised. On the reverse side of these sandwiches, in a sort of mediæval type, on a scroll, appeared the words, Y^e^ Hole in ye Wall. A grotesque figure was painted beneath it, a caricature of the manager, or perhaps of myself. Its colours were yellow, and green, and red.

"You are disappointed, dear, I am afraid," said Nelly's gentle voice, as I stood gazing over the bridge at the dark river, while Hood's poem recurred to my mind with a new meaning:

"One more unfortunate,
Rashly importunate.
* * *
Just on the brink of it,
Picture it, think of it."

My play was coming out that very night, without a word of warning, at that horrible Hole!

I gasped out something, in reply to her kind inquiries, to that effect.

"But the word 'Pack' was not on the placards," reasoned Nelly.

"I wish 'Pedlar' had not been there either," was my sombre reply. "O that villain Burder!"

"They haven't put 'of Gatcombe' on the placards, have they, Fred?" pleaded Aunt Ben. "Not Wray of Gatcombe?"

"I daresay it's on the bills," groaned I despairingly. "I must go and see." I hailed a four-wheel cab, and dispatched the ladies home in it, then jumped into a hansom myself. "Do you know the Hole-in-the-Wall?" asked I through the hole in the roof.

"Bingles's Free and Easy, *we* calls it," was the crushing reply. "O yes; I'll take you there in no time."

And he did. He pulled up at a gigantic public-house —for a dram, as I fondly hoped. "This is Bingles's," he said. And it was.

I asked at the bar for the proprietor, and was informed that "Mr. Bingles was in the theâtyr." A pot-boy undertook to conduct me to him. We passed through a large boarded court with a stand for musicians in it placed in a garden composed of six American aloes in tubs.

"Here's where they dance," said the pot-boy, perceiving that I was a stranger to his lord's domain. "Five hundred couples and more there'll be on a fine night here."

"And how many does your theatre hold?"

"Our theâtyr?" said he, as if in delicate reproof of my mispronunciation. "O, that holds as many as it can git."

"There is a new play to be acted to-night, is there
?"

"I daresay, sir; there mostly is, once a week."

"Do your plays only run six days, then?" asked I aghast.

"Why, no, sir. If our master was to try to run 'em seven, the Bobbies would be down upon him pretty sharp. You can square 'em a'most for everything, except Sunday-work."

It was not worth while to undeceive this young man, though my inquiry certainly had no connection with the Sabbath question.

We had arrived at the theatre by this time, a huge oblong edifice, before the stage-door of which a stout squat man was standing in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a pipe.

"That is Bingles," muttered the pot-boy, and vanished.

For the first time I beheld a manager in the flesh.

"Morning!" said the great man, taking his right thumb out of the arm-hole of his waistcoat to remove his pipe. "What can I do for *you*, sir?"

"I have called upon business in connection with the new play that you are bringing out to-night."

"Ay, ay; yes, I believe there is one."

"Believe?" said I. "Why, it's advertised all over the town."

Mr. Bingles nodded, and removed his pipe once more, to scratch his head with the stem of it.

"I am the author of that play," said I, with some dignity.

A fly had settled upon the manager's nose, induced by what temptation it is impossible to imagine (if it had been a butterfly, I should not have been surprised, since it might have mistaken that favourable description of eruption known to the vulgar, if not to the scientific, as

"grog-blossoms," for flowers); and Mr. Bingles proceeded to catch it with elaboration, and succeeded.

"Very good," said he. "You want to have your name in the bills? I thought you would, but Burder said you wouldn't. It's not my fault."

"I want nothing of the kind, Mr. Bingles. But I do desire an explanation of your extraordinary conduct in never letting me know that the play was about to be produced. I have not even been invited to a rehearsal."

"What's the use?" replied the manager curtly. "It only leads to disagreements. Gillow—that's our funny man, you know—will always have his own way; and as for our other people, why, they don't matter."

"Do you mean that it does not matter how the pathetic and sentimental characters of the *Pedlar's Pack* are sustained?" inquired I in amazement.

"Just so; it don't signify tuppence. If Gillow can tickle the public, the play goes; if it don't go, it stops. Our last play stopped quite sudden, and that's how yourn was put on in such a hurry. Not one of my company," said Mr. Bingles, in triumph, "knew a line of it yesterday morning!"

"And they're going to act it to-night?"

"Most cert'ny. See bills."

I had given Mr. Burder full authority to dispose of my drama, and I had no reason to believe that I could restrain Mr. Bingles from doing what he pleased in the matter; nothing remained for me, therefore, but conciliation. "I suppose they will take pains to improve themselves in accuracy, and in their conception of the author's meaning, as they go on?" observed I.

"O yes; never fear about that. Gillow is never the same man two evenings running."

I had already dreadful presentiments about Gillow.

"And how many evenings, Mr. Bingles, do you think the *Pedlar's Pack* will run?"

"It is quite impossible to say, sir. It all depends on how Gillow takes. I call him Vaccination on that account; sometimes he spots them, and sometimes he don't. Our last play ran—walked, I should say—like a blessed ghost in an empty house, for three nights. The one we had before was a—"

"Was a *what?*" inquired I, in alarm. I did not quite catch the word; but I have a very strong suspicion that Mr. Bingles used the term "buster."

"Was a great success," continued he; "it ran ten nights."

"And how much," said I, emboldened by Mr. Bingles's manner to be frank myself, "did the author make by that transaction?"

"Why, lucky dog!" cried the manager, slapping his knee, "I offered him thirty shillings down; but he said: 'No; I'll chance it—I'll be paid by the night;' and so he was. Five shillings a night, sir, for ten nights, did I pay that fellow; and the copyright of the play remains his own, to do what he likes with."

This was the one piece of good news that Mr. Bingles gave me. The copyright of the *Pedlar's Pack* would remain my own after it had once passed through this terrible ordeal. Along with the other thirty or forty plays —all supplied by answers to advertisements—that came out at the Hole-in-the-Wall per annum, it would probably flourish for a week, then fade, and be forgotten, to reappear, I hoped, in a nobler sphere. As to remuneration, Burder had arranged nothing about that; and there was nothing to be done but to accept the same terms as my predecessor.

My manager and I parted on excellent terms. He

had given me a private box for that evening, and his last words were a courteous invitation to partake of refreshment.

"'Ave a drain, sir?—No? Well, perhaps to-night, then, you'll come in time to drink a glass with Gillow. You'll find him fust-rate company."

Aunt Ben, Nelly, and myself were in time for the play that night, but not to drink a glass with Gillow. Our leisure was wholly taken up in the contemplation of the interior of the Theatre Royal Hole-in-the-Wall—its decorations, arrangements, and peculiarities. The box which had been reserved for our use had three cane chairs in it; but the accommodation in that respect was insufficient; because, as in the case of Silverhair and the Three Bears, somebody had been sitting on the third chair and had sat the bottom out. Round the outside of each box ran a dark fringe of about six inches long, which we at first took for painting in panel: this, however, was caused by a habit in which the inmates indulged of hanging their ungloved hands over the ledges, and beating time or applause therewith upon the woodwork beneath. In the centre of the building, which was very large, was a refreshment bar (with entrances from the pit), in which was a beer-engine of great power, worked, as it seemed, upon the perpetual motion principle. Delicacies of all kinds—the audience were informed by placard—could be procured within the establishment and without leaving their seats, "as good as at any house in the neighbourhood." This was a bold statement, since, to judge from the drop-curtain, which, in place of a classical picture, exhibited a congeries of local advertisements, the neighbourhood was in a condition to supply every desire of humanity from the cradle to the grave—from *Infants' Elixir* to a *One-horse Hearse.* The

stalls—for there *were* stalls—had no divisions between them, and were patronised (my aunt charitably supposed) either by married folk, or by young persons whose engagements were sufficiently acknowledged in society to admit of their being tender towards one another. The protecting arm of the swain (in its shirt-sleeve) was thrown, almost in every case, around his beloved object, who, on her part, leaned her confiding head upon his manly bosom. The question of toilet had greatly puzzled my two companions; they did not like to be too finely dressed—and yet they had an idea that the tenants of a private box ought to do credit to the establishment: the result had been what they considered to be a medium apparel, but which, by its contrast with that of the other female occupants of the house, was a blaze of splendour. Much public comment was therefore passed upon them, which, though for the most part of a complimentary character, they felt to be embarrassing, and were much relieved when the curtain rose, and the general attention was directed to the stage.

It is not my purpose to describe the performance of that unhappy piece; a shiver goes through my frame, as I recall it now, similar to that evoked by the opening of a pill-box. It was not my play at all, but a heterogeneous compound, half of which owed its paternity to me, and half to Gillow. He did not act the comic character, because, I suppose, it was not sufficiently important for him; he took a serious rôle, and made *that* comic. He was the legal guardian of the heroine, a bluff good-humoured gentleman enough (as I had made him), but not likely, when visiting his ward at school, to put on her backboard, and sing a comic song with a dumb-bell in each hand. He made a joke about a "dumb belle," which, instead of falling flat, as it ought to have done

—it fell on *me* just like a cold pat of lead—was uproariously applauded. My aunt began to applaud too, which compelled me to tell her that I was not answerable for the witticism. Next to "gag" (an interpolation of original dialogue), Mr. Gillow was remarkable for original costume. He had a green coat with brass buttons and nankeen pantaloons; and they must have been of very durable materials, since, in the second act, though "twenty years were supposed to have elapsed" in the action of the drama, he wore them still. As to the pathetic touches, they moved me to tears of chagrin; for the actresses had but one solitary *h* among them, which they invariably prefixed to the word "honour." A cry for assistance in extremity, followed by the reflection that, under the circumstances, it was no use to cry, was thus rendered by the heroine: "'Elp, 'elp! but 'ow?" Then, with a disappointed air, she added: "Alas, I 'ave no 'ope, except in 'eaven."

Altogether, the *Pedlar's Pack*, as performed at the Hole-in-the-Wall, was too dreadful to sit out; the Inquisition itself could hardly have devised for a dramatic author a torture more terrible than to see his first-born play so torn in pieces before his eyes.

When we had left the place, however, and were in the cab, and just as Aunt Ben was in the act of saying something of consolation and condolement, the full absurdity of the whole affair began to strike us, and we all three indulged in quite a paroxysm of laughter. We had each a favourite quotation to repeat from Mr. Gillow, or an aspiration (without an aspirate) from the other performers, and made very merry with our *fiasco* all the way home.

I know not whether it really is so, but it seems to me that it is the times when the laughter is loudest, and the

heart most free from care, which envious Fate selects to shoot at us poor mortals her sharpest arrows.

I noticed that as soon as we entered the house my aunt's mirth had died away; she ate nothing at supper, though we had a lobster, which was her favourite dish, and immediately afterwards proposed retiring upstairs, on the plea of fatigue.

I was sitting in my own room, with a pipe, as my custom was when the ladies had withdrawn, when the door opened, and in came Aunt Ben with a ghastly face.

"I found this on the hall table when we came home," said she, holding up a letter with a deep black edge. "I snatched it up, and put it in my pocket, so that Nelly should not see it. It is from Switzerland, and I am afraid there is bad news."

"Good heavens!" cried I; "from Cecil?"

"Open it; it is for you," said my aunt, with a certain twitching at the corners of her mouth, which only manifested itself with her at times of great emotion.

I tore open the envelope at once.

"It *is* bad news," said I solemnly. "Poor Jane is dead!"

"Lord have mercy on us!" ejaculated my aunt. "I knew there was death in it. I am sorry, Heaven knows, from the bottom of my heart; and yet I am almost ashamed to say it: I feel thankful that it is no worse."

"No *worse?*" returned I, greatly displeased; for though my conscience was clear enough as respected poor Jane, I felt at the moment a sort of remorse that I had been unable to reciprocate her affection. "How could it have been worse, aunt?"

"My dear," said she, "I was afraid that it was Cecil."

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Return Home.

JANE was not only dead, but, what is much more shocking to those who receive such calamitous news, she had died a violent death. Cecil's letter ran as follows:

Æggischorn Hotel.

MY DEAREST FRIEND,—I write this in the most terrible distress of mind and wretchedness that it is possible to conceive. My dearest Jane is dead and lost. I told you (I think) in my last letter how bold and venturesome she was in our mountain excursions, exciting the wonder of our fellow-tourists, and even of the guides. Well, that is all over now. She has paid the penalty of her rashness—if she indeed were rash—with her precious life: precious to me, at all events, my friend, if to no other. Even now, when I wish to write of her, so united were we, that I find myself writing, not of her fate, but of my own, which is to be alone in the world for ever.

We had been staying at this hotel for some time, and making excursions from it among the mountains; especially we had been more than once to the beautiful Märjelensee, and had grown quite familiar with it. Beyond it lies the Alitsch glacier; we had been thither also. The snow had hidden its crevasses, so that we had to be very careful; but our guide was a good one, and perhaps for that very reason his work looked much easier than it really was. He told us that the snow was the great danger; and that, if we could only have seen our way, there would have been little to fear. A few days afterwards, I proposed to Jane—yes, it was I; I own it—to go to the Märjelensee alone. I had not the least intention to proceed farther; and, as it happened, we did not even go thither alone, for we were accompanied by a party bound

for the Faulberg, where they were to pass the night on the rocks. These, with their guides, left us upon the brink of the Alitsch glacier, with the understanding that we ourselves were returning homeward—that is, to the hotel. How shall I describe to you what then happened? I grow sick and faint even while I think of it. Jane and I watched our late companions until they were specks—black dots on the waste of ice and snow. It was early in the afternoon, and we had plenty of time before us. Alas, for one of us there was an eternity! It was Jane, and not I, who then proposed that we should extend our own wanderings a little. A great peak rose above us, one side of which went sheer down to the glacier; but the other, though steep, looked practicable enough from where we stood. "Let us climb it," said she; "what a splendid view we shall then have!" You know, dearest Fred, that I could never refuse my sister anything; and, besides, I confess that I saw no great danger in the adventure. Well, we climbed it, and rested on its wedge-like summit, beneath which we could look—though scarce without some dizziness—right down upon the glacier, bare of snow just there, and showing in places a crack—a crevice, as it appeared; each of which, however, was a deep crevasse. There was scarce a breath of air abroad, as we stood leaning on our alpenstocks, entranced with the solemn splendours of the scene. I had just looked at my watch—it was half-past three o'clock—and had mechanically turned round in the direction of the Æggischorn, when a terrible cry rang through the silent air. Jane was no longer by my side! O heaven, the horror of that moment! My heart ceased to beat; it seemed as though my own life had fled with hers; for even in that moment, as I strive to believe, she had lost her life. I strive, but I cannot persuade myself, alas, for I saw her falling, falling

down that terrible precipice, with her poor hands stretched out in vain to save herself, and then shoot on to the gray-blue glacier and disappear. Pity me, dear Fred; pity me! Not only could I do nothing—I could not even *think* for her; not, indeed, that thought could have availed her—but I knelt down upon that fatal ridge, and gazed and gazed till I seemed to see the whole dreadful thing, as in a dream, pass before my eyes again and again; and yet I knew all the while that she was lying in the depths of some crevasse, a corpse, and colder than any corpse. I cannot tell you how long I thus remained, and hardly what I did, when I came to my wretched self. But I got down the peak somehow, the same way as we had ascended it, though with infinite difficulty, for I trembled in every limb, and then—you will say—returned to the hotel for aid. That is what has already been said to me: "Why did you not return at once?" If aid had then been possible, doubtless I should have done so; but if my darling had had fifty lives, they must all have been lost long since, not to mention that it would have taken me hours, in the condition to which grief and terror had reduced me, to reach the inn at all, and she all the while deep down in the cruel ice. I could not bear to leave the spot; I strove to get on to where I thought she was, and called her name a hundred times; but she was dumb.

How I got home myself I cannot tell, or how the hours passed in the mean time. It was moonlight when I arrived there somehow, and not in my senses even then; for it seems I must have gone straight to her room —the people of the inn being all in bed, and its door as usual unfastened—as though to assure myself that I had indeed been witness to what seemed still a nightmare vision too terrible for reality. But the next minute I had roused the house, and told them all.

Though Nature is so cruel—can I ever forget the cold and glittering beauty of that hateful glacier, whose ravening maw had swallowed up my darling, as I saw it that night by moonlight?—Man is kind; and a party was formed at once to go and search for Jane. So weak and exhausted was I, that I had to be carried on men's shoulders; for, of course, my presence was necessary in order to identify the fatal spot. Ill and bewildered as I was, there was no difficulty in that. I should have known it, I do believe, blindfold. But though we had ropes and appliances of all kinds, and bold men, whose services I feel no money can repay, who suffered themselves to be lowered down, down into those icy depths, it was all in vain. They came up numb and half-dead themselves, and reported that they had not neared the bottom of that ghastly grave. I have said that she was dead and lost. There she lies yet, Fred, and will lie, perchance, until the judgment-day, unless, as is said, the slow-moving glacier, scores of years to come, shall bring her dear remains to light, to the eyes of an unborn generation. If the news of such a catastrophe is awful to you, what then, think you, must the event itself have been to *me*, the helpless witness of it! My nerves are shattered and gone. You will see me an altered man, Fred; but you will see me soon. I cannot bear this loneliness any longer, or remain here, now that all has been accomplished which is practicable—I refer to the attempts to recover the body. I have been assured this morning by a delegate from a sort of committee of guides, who have been engaged in this sad service, that there is not the faintest hope of success. I shall start for London to-morrow, and arrive in Merton-square on the heels of this letter. I know I shall find a welcome there—a place of rest after this heavy trouble. It is no longer a sharp

pain, as at first, which consumes me; my existence is become an aching void. But these are words of little meaning; only when you see me will you be able to discern what has been wrought in me by the events of the last few days. I have not heard news of you for a month; no doubt in consequence of our late erratic movements, and not of any neglect on your part. Heaven grant that with you, at least, all is well!—Believe me, my dear Fred, in my present wretchedness, even more than of old, to be yours ever faithfully, CECIL WRAY.

Poor Cecil! How thoroughly I sympathised with him! how deeply I pitied him! Never in my young life had I read any words that so affected me as these. And yet, though the letter was full of feeling, it seemed a curiously reticent one. My cousin had scarcely ever written to me before without some tender allusion to his sister's affection for myself; and *now* of all times, when she was dead and gone, it was to have been expected that he would have referred to it. Poor Jane! Her courage I had never doubted, nor had I been surprised to hear of her accompanying her brother in perilous places; but I should have thought he would have insisted upon their having guides. I had begged of him, while in South America, not to be so venturesome; and it was unlike him to have neglected any appeal of mine. "Never fear; *you shall see my face again*," he had written back, half in jest; and though I was about to do so, he had little thought that I should see *his* face only, without that other one, which had been almost as constant to it as its own shadow.

Well, we would do all we could for him with willing hearts. Aunt Ben would welcome him as of old; and Eleanor (whom, since he had not heard from us of late, he would not expect to find with us) would hold out a

sisterly hand to him, though she might never supply his sister's place.

All next day, and the next, we three could talk of nothing but of Jane's awful fate. We dwelt upon the good that was in her—her courage, her resolution, her devotion to her brother, and even on her accomplishments, such as music, down to the patient toil she used to bestow on the intricacies of her Chinese puzzle; and we forgot, or strove to do so, all her faults. As time went on, in every hour of which we looked for my cousin's coming, we still talked of her, but more at large.

Aunt Ben's affection for Cecil was great and genuine, as I have said; but, of course, she did not entertain the love for him which friendship had grafted in *me*. She knew of poor Jane's old *tendresse* (how old it seemed!) for myself; but it did not seem to her now as it did to me. She discoursed, therefore, upon the calamity with less of reverence, if I may use the word, than I did. It is the nature of women, I think, to treat such matters with more familiarity than men use; and her words sometimes jarred upon me. I was much annoyed by one observation of hers in particular, which seemed to me in very bad taste. I can apply to it no worse terms; for "heartless" I knew it was not. "Only think," said she, "if this shocking accident had happened to her brother, instead of poor Jane, how rich you would have been, Fred!"

I replied with indignation that I would not have had it so for a million of money. The very idea of such a thing seemed to freeze my blood, just as it had, to do her justice, frozen Aunt Ben's when she thought the letter had come from Jane.

"I believe it, my dear Fred," returned my aunt; "your friendship is a right loyal one; else it might have occurred to some people in your position, debarred—at

all events for the present—by lack of means from wedding such a girl as our Eleanor—"

"My dear Aunt Ben," broke in Nelly, "I should not love Fred, if I thought him capable of harbouring such a thought."

A reply so creditable to my darling, that I thought it only right to reward her for it with a kiss.

Another, and another day, and yet no Cecil. At last a letter from him, from Paris—where he had been taken ill; it seemed—to say he would be with us that evening, but not to dinner. We dined, therefore, as usual; and afterwards all three remained below stairs, because the dining-room window looked into the square, and we could watch for him. It was autumn, and the nights were fast drawing in. It grew almost dark; and yet we did not ring to have the shutters closed, nor the lamp lit. It seemed better that he should come to us in the gray twilight somehow, and not show every seam that sorrow might have made in his poor face to our tearful eyes at first.

The long-expected cab at last drew up at the door; and the next instant we heard Cecil's voice—very sad and broken, it seemed, but still unmistakably his. As he came into the room, I threw myself into his arms.

"Dear Cecil," cried I, "welcome home!"

Considering the cause that had brought him, it was impossible to say more. Surely it could not be that he thought my words less warm than they might have been, but I fancied that he did not return my hand-grasp with responsive cordiality. I did not then know that grief is called "bitter" because it sometimes makes acrid the sweet waters of the soul. The next instant, however, he was himself again, and sobbed out,

"God bless you, Fred!" then hid himself in the arms of good Aunt Ben.

"You are better, I trust?" said she, her usual good sense at once suggesting allusion to his own recent indisposition, and avoiding for the moment the more painful subject.

"Yes; I am well enough now," said he wearily; "that is, what there *is* of me."

Indeed, he looked shrunk and pale enough, and, in fact, what he had warned us that we should see him, "an altered man." He had not grown a beard, as travelled people often do; but the wholesome colour that life at Gatcombe had given to him was, so far as I could judge by that dim light, quite gone. He looked more like what he was when he had first come from India; and through that association he seemed, curiously enough, a younger man. But the lines in his face had, on the other hand, aged him much; and the tremor of his limbs, and the unsteady accents of his tongue, corroborated only too well the words of his own letter, "my nerves are shaken and gone."

Eleanor had hitherto remained in the background; but now she came forward with extended hand, just as the servant was bringing in the lighted lamp.

"Who is this?" cried Cecil, starting back almost, as it seemed, in alarm.

"Why, it's Nelly, to be sure," said I, unconsciously adopting a soothing tone; for, for the moment, it really struck me that my poor cousin's brain was affected.

"O, yes; I forgot. I—I beg your pardon," stammered Cecil. "I did not expect to see *you* here, Eleanor;" and he kissed her cheek.

"O, yes," said Aunt Ben cheerfully; "Nelly is one of us now; as you would have heard, had you received our last letter."

"One of *you?*" gasped he, looking at me as if for an explanation. "What does she mean?"

"She is living with us, under my aunt's roof at present, Cecil."

"Living *here!*" exclaimed my cousin excitedly. Then, turning round to the servant, he cried: "Stop the cab! —do you hear me?—or call another. Don't take my luggage upstairs. I won't have it!"

It was plain to us now that there was something wrong with poor Cecil's brain: it must have given way under the pressure of his grief; or perhaps it was owing to his late illness, which might have been sunstroke. Eleanor slipped out of the room at once, and my aunt motioned the servant to go away.

"My dear Cecil," said she quietly, "why should you refuse to stay here because Eleanor is with us?"

Cecil pointed to me with a shaking finger, and murmured hoarsely:

"*He* knows why."

Then I perceived, for the first time, what was the real state of affairs. My cousin's mind was wholly taken up with the thoughts of his lost sister: he had been her confidant with respect to her affection for myself, and he could not just now endure to live under the same roof with her who had won the love I had denied to Jane. It was very sad and painful; but, knowing Cecil's sensitive nature as I did, it seemed characteristic enough.

"I know to what you refer, Cecil," said I; "or I think I do; but I do trust you will not allow a morbid sentiment to affect you so deplorably."

Cecil had fallen into a chair and hidden his face—the very picture of despairing woe.

"Bear with me, both of you, for a little," groaned he. "I will see her to-morrow. Yes, yes; we shall be

good friends, as of old, no doubt, in time; but I cannot live here. If there is an inn near, I will go there, please."

We thought it right not to argue with him farther; and apartments were secured for him at a neighbouring hotel for the night. After this had been arranged, he seemed to grow calmer, discoursed of the catastrophe which had deprived him of his *alter ego* with greater self-command than could have been expected of him; and we felt tolerably convinced that our fears had been groundless with respect to his state of mind. Some refreshment was brought in for him, of which he ate but little; though he drank more wine than he had been used to drink; and after more talk in excited tones concerning Jane, he presently withdrew to his hotel, promising to breakfast with us the ensuing morning.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Just in Time.

Of course, poor Cecil's conduct distressed us all very much; but we sympathised far too deeply with the cause of it to feel angry with him. I confess I felt a little sore upon dear Nelly's account; for it seemed a cruel thing that she, who had no other home than ours, should be made to feel that her presence was an obstacle to my cousin's reception there. But Nelly behaved like an angel: she kept out of Cecil's way as much as possible; and when she was compelled to be in his company, as at meals, she showed a tact and delicacy that drew forth from Aunt Ben, when she and I were alone together, the warmest eulogiums. Cecil, on his part, I do honestly believe, did his best to get over his most unwarrantable prejudice, and was studiously polite and civil to her, as though desirous to make amends for that first outbreak;

but his behaviour, at the best, was only like that of a gentleman of courtly manners, and those somewhat stiff. His old genial tone was gone, as regarded Nelly, altogether, and sadly altered with respect to Aunt Ben and myself. I am bound to say that, so far as feeling went, I think he loved me no less than of old; but the tender frankness that had formerly characterised him had now given place to a melancholy reserve. He had been wont to be a great talker, and his laugh (before the occurrence of that miserable affair at Gatcombe, which had exiled him from home and country and sweetheart, and been indirectly the cause of his sister's death) had been one of those cheery ones which win answering echoes from those who hear it; but he was very silent now; and if he smiled, it was easy to see the effort that it cost him to do so. It was not likely, we thought, that he would be interested with ordinary topics; and, besides, we felt a delicacy in discussing them in his presence; and so it happened that our constant talk was about poor Jane; so that we became a very mournful little company.

After dinner, over a cigar—I say *a* cigar, for my cousin never smoked, which at this time was certainly a misfortune for him, when he stood so much in need of solace—Cecil would emerge a little from his shell of reticence (or perhaps it was I who drew him out, as it were, by the horns), and talk of his South-American experiences; but any reference to Gatcombe seemed distasteful to him, though I studiously avoided such recollections of the place as were not immediately connected with his sister. He answered in monosyllables, and at times seemed to be quite oblivious to what I was talking about. I reminded him of the old days when we used to Beaumont-and-Fletcher it together; but it touched no responsive chord, though he professed a great interest in

my present dramatic fortunes, and listened with attention when I spoke of them. (How little he guessed, poor fellow, that the successful young actress to whom I hoped to be indebted for my introduction to the stage—for the Hole-in-the-Wall *fiasco* I counted as nothing—was his own Ruth!) He seemed almost to have lost his memory for all events in which Jane had had no share. So curious an instance of this occurred one day, that the idea that his brain was affected again intruded itself upon my mind, and gave me great uneasiness. It happened in this way. One of my early attempts at dramatic writing was a sort of burlesque in verse, on the subject of Bluebeard. Before the wicked villain was slain, the avenging brothers were made to discuss his character: in speaking of the airs he gave himself, one described him rather wittily as

"A wretched Cove who thinks himself a Bey;"

and *apropos* to something Cecil and I were discoursing about, I quoted this line, and asked him if he remembered it.

"Of course I do," said he; "I remember I used to think it one of your very best."

"But it was not mine at all," returned I.

"Indeed!" said he. "Whose was it?"

"Why, *yours*," answered I, in great surprise (and, indeed, not without some trepidation on his account). "Don't you remember coming to my room at Gatcombe, with the slip of paper in your hand, with that very line written out upon it, and telling me that the words had suddenly struck you, and that you had been afraid of forgetting them? Why, my dear Cecil, you must surely remember *that*?"

"No," said my cousin, smiling faintly, and with a

strange pained look. "I remember nothing now, except what I would wish to forget."

"You surely do not forget Ruth Waller?" said I significantly. It struck me that it was better to speak plainly with him, and also, upon my own account, I was very eager to get that subject over: he might otherwise allude to it at a less opportune moment, and detect in me some signs of embarrassment.

"Forget her? Great heaven! never!" cried he. He trembled in every limb; his accents were those of positive terror.

"Do you wish to forget her, then?" said I. "Is it possible that this misfortune of yours should not only disincline you towards your old friends—"

"Misfortune!" echoed Cecil, interrupting me.

"Well, my friend, call it what you will. This catastrophe, then, which fills all of us with terror and regret, —I say, are you going to permit it to make your whole life miserable—to chill your heart against love itself?"

"Do not talk to me of love, Fred," said he, trembling again; "that is over and done with."

"You think so now," said I. "But all wounds heal in time; and supposing that this mystery of Waller's death should be cleared up—"

"It never will be," broke in Cecil in a hollow voice. "It never can be!"

"Nay, but if it *should* be, and Ruth were to be found—"

"I do not desire to meet her," interrupted he. "I tell you that, if she were found to-morrow, I would not see her!"

He spoke with passionate energy, as though he would have made up by force of expression for his lack of fixed resolve; for it was monstrous, I thought, that the antipathy entertained by his sister against Ruth should affect

him seriously for long. For the present, however, it was evidently better to avoid this subject. My allusion to it seemed to have already disturbed him greatly; for he rose, and proposed our joining the ladies, much before our usual time. As a rule, he preferred to be alone with me, as I have said, though he did not smoke.

We found Eleanor at the piano, and I asked Cecil to play an accompaniment with her on the flute. He shook his head. "I have quite forgotten my flute-playing," said he; "it would be useless to attempt it." Then he whispered to me that that was not his true reason for declining, but that he would never play the flute again, because he had been wont to do so with Jane only.

"That is another pleasure sacrificed to a morbid idea," said I. "Your sorrow takes an unhealthy form, indeed." I suppose I spoke rather sharply (and I own I was getting somewhat impatient at his conduct); for I saw a keen expression of pain come into his face. "Forgive me, my dear Cecil," continued I; "but I do hope you are not serious in what you say. To give up your music would, just now, be indeed bad for you."

"If you think so," said he submissively, "I will not give it up." And presently, when Nelly left her seat, he sat down at the instrument and played a few pieces. I noticed that he chose those of which his sister used to be fond, and not his own old favourites; and it seemed to me that his touch was improved—the reason of which was plain enough: he played, as the critics say, "with feeling."

"Do you remember the last time I ever heard you play, Cecil?" said I, as I leaned over him.

"Yes," he said; "it was this, was it not?" His fingers struck out at once, "And ye shall walk in silk attire." It was the tune he had played that night at Gatcombe

when he had announced his determination to marry Ruth; and even now, at the last verse,

"And ere I'm found to break my faith,
I'll lay me doun and dee,"

that look of tender resolve which he had worn when he played it then came once more into his face.

Now, if he had really given up all thought of Ruth, how could this have been?

Cecil's conduct altogether, in short, was not only strange, but inconsistent; and I put this down, at first, to the struggle in his own mind between his natural inclination and the course he had imposed upon himself to take, out of respect for Jane's memory. In time, I thought, the former would gain the upper hand, and he would be himself again. But in this, it seemed, I was mistaken. A very curious phase began to exhibit itself in my cousin's character, and one of the existence of which I (who had fancied I knew him so well) had certainly never dreamed. He began to show an alacrity in business matters; not exactly a passion for money, but an interest in it, which he had never showed before. It was only with the utmost difficulty that my father had been able to get him to listen to any statement of his own affairs; whereas now he seemed to like nothing so well as to make appointments with his lawyer, Mr. Clote—the same whom my uncle had named as trustee to the twins in conjunction with my father—and to discourse of the great property that would accrue to him upon his coming of age. Though this puzzled us, we were all inclined to think it a good sign, for we had begun to despair of the poor fellow's becoming interested in anything; but, unhappily, he pushed this interest so far beyond all reasonable limits, that it began to injure his whole character. It became plain to me that my once kind, generous, impulsive

friend was becoming—it is a harsh word, and I was very slow to use it—purse-proud. Though I am sure he entertained all his old affection for me, he wanted to be something besides my friend—something which is not only very different from but incompatible with friendship —namely, my patron. He knew that I was comparatively poor; and starting upon those premises, he took upon himself not only to administer lectures upon my improvidence generally, but actually had the bad taste to warn me against contracting marriage upon slender means. I could scarcely believe my ears, when they heard him. For the first time in my life, I was seriously angry with my cousin; still, I remembered the heavy blow that had befallen him—though not by this time what could be called recently—and for the sake of the old days, and because he was under my own roof, I hesitated to express what I felt. Unhappily he took my silence for a sign that I was willing to hear more on the same theme. "You must not think," said he, "that I am actuated by any feeling against Eleanor in the advice I have ventured to give you; I should say the same if you had imprudently engaged yourself to any other young lady with insufficient means."

"You are most generous, Cecil," said I coldly, "with your advice; but—"

"Excuse me," interrupted he with haste: "do not mistake me, Fred; not only my advice, but all else that belongs to me is equally at your service. I should not think it right—from principle, I assure you, and not from any morbid antipathy, such as you may imagine—to make over to you, for example, any large sum to enable you to marry Eleanor—"

"Cecil," cried I, "are you drunk or mad, that you dare to speak to me in this manner?"

"Hear me out, hear me out!" answered he excitedly: "I was about to add that, for your own benefit—to do you certain good—there is no sum within my means that I would hesitate to give you."

"Cecil," said I, speaking under great excitement, "you have destroyed, by your last five minutes' talk, the work of years of friendship. You told me in your letter from Switzerland to expect to find you another man; I am sorry to say that that expectation is fulfilled. You have spoken what no gentleman should speak—what should never, for an instant, have even entered into his mind. You have proposed to yourself to bribe me with your money to give up my promised bride. And why? Because, forsooth, Jane was jealous of her! If your sister's memory urges you thus to disgrace yourself, the sooner you forget her the better. To be plain with you (for you have earned plainness), her influence with you was always for evil; and now that she is dead, she seems to be doing you more harm than she did when alive. I have borne with your morbid fancies long enough. I will not have them brought to bear against my darling, who is worth ten thousand Janes—nor, when I have said that, have I estimated Nelly very highly!"

It was a most improper speech to make to my guest and sorely-stricken friend; and the instant it had hurried from my lips, I was sorry for it. The effect upon him was quite shocking to witness: he put up his hands, to shield himself from those sharp words, as though they had been visible arrows.

"Spare me, spare me!" cried he bitterly: "you have said enough!"

"I had no intention to say more, or to hurt your feelings at all, Cecil," said I; "but you drove me to do so. If you have a regard for me, as you profess (and

which I do not doubt), you should have also some consideration for her with whom my life is henceforth to be bound up. You should not have supposed that I would have given her up for any reason on earth, and far less have insulted me by offering me money to do so. I own, however, I was wrong to use such words about Jane. I did not, it is true, entertain much affection for her: nobody did, Cecil, as you well know, except yourself; but it is not right to say harsh things of the dead."

It was not so much anger against Cecil (though I was still very angry) that caused me to speak so plainly, as a desire to strike, once for all, and for all our sakes, against these eternal references to his lost sister. My words had in the end the desired result, for he became for the future almost reticent regarding her; but, in the mean time, their effect was far beyond what I had intended. Cecil seemed literally to shrink into himself; he strove to speak, and failed; then, white and trembling, he arose, and had passed swiftly out of the room and out of the house, bareheaded, and taken a cab to his hotel, or elsewhere, before I could think of what to say or to do.

To Nelly I was obliged to explain his precipitate departure upon the ground of sudden indisposition, for I could not, of course, reveal to her what had in reality caused it; but to Aunt Ben I confided all. Devoted to Eleanor, of whose merits, since she had been an inmate of our house, she was more convinced than ever, my aunt by no means blamed the sharpness which I had used on her behalf; but, on the other hand, she expressed herself as seriously apprehensive of its effect upon Cecil.

"Yes," said I gloomily; "he will never forgive me. Instead of our old friendship re-awakening, as I had hoped it would in time, I fear that we have killed it between us."

"No, no," said Aunt Ben positively; "there is no fear of that; all the affection that is left in the poor lad is concentrated upon yourself. But I think you should see him again to-night, after what has happened."

"But we had no quarrel," argued I; "or rather, *I*, at least, have said nothing that I wish to unsay."

"My dear Fred," returned Aunt Ben gravely, "that is not the question. I do not blame you for feeling as you do, nor wonder that my suggestion is distasteful to you. But Cecil is not himself; he has no one with him, and he conceives that he has mortally offended the only friend he has in the world. There is no knowing, in his morbid and excited state, what rash act he may not be capable of committing.

"If I thought *that*—" said I, with hesitation.

"Well, *I* think so, Fred. If it is only an old woman's fancy, you have given in to such already many a time" (here she kissed my forehead); "it is only doing so once more: for my sake, follow him. He has left his hat: let that be your excuse, if your pride insists on one; but pray, go at once."

I went, of course. A thousand times since then have I blessed Aunt Ben for making me do so. The conviction that she was right was strengthened with every step I took; and before I had reached the hotel, the likelihood of the peril at which she had hinted was only too apparent to me. I ran upstairs unannounced, and opened his sitting-room door without knocking. He was not there; but I heard him moving about in his bedroom beyond. The two rooms communicated with one another. Upon the table lay the old-fashioned desk which had been his father's, with a letter on it, the address of which—and it was my own—was not yet dry. I hesitated as to whether or not I should read the contents, doubt-

ing if I was privileged to do so; and also reflecting, if they should be words of farewell, would it not distress him, if all should still be made right, to know that I had perused them? Most fortunately, as I now think, I decided not to do so. I stepped to the bedroom and tried the handle of the door; it was not locked, and I softly opened it an inch or two, and put my foot in, so that it could not be closed against me. Then, in a voice which I did not recognise myself, so overcome was I with anxiety, I called "Cecil!"

There was a sound of some metal falling on the ground—a razor as I rightly guessed—and on the instant, I rushed in headlong. My cousin was alive and untouched; but his bared throat, and the weapon lying on the floor, were proofs of how narrowly I had escaped being too late. The situation was terrible enough; but not even the expectation of immediate death, I should have thought, and by self-murder, could have imprinted on human countenance such unutterable terror as that with which my cousin now regarded me.

Startled from his purpose, I suppose, by the sudden utterance of his own name, he had fallen back against the bed, and there remained, half standing, half supported by it, speechless and staring. To give him time to collect himself, I picked up the razor, and put it into its case; then I advanced towards him, holding out my hand. He motioned me away with a frantic gesture.

"Have you read that letter?" said he in hoarse low tones.

"No, Cecil."

"Upon your solemn oath?"

"Yes," said I, "if you wish to have it. I thought that I was not privileged to do so. But," added I reprovingly, "I can guess its contents only too well."

"Ah!" He gave a sigh of intense relief, took out his handkerchief, to wipe the perspiration that covered his forehead, and rose feebly to his feet. "It was very, very wicked of me, Fred," said he; "a minute later, and we should both have got our deserts. You would have had wealth—the means of happiness, in your case—and I—I should have been a lost soul!"

Shocked as I was, it struck me as very strange that at such a time he should be thinking of his money. It had evidently become a disease with him to do so; nor are other cases unknown, though rare, in which excessive grief has taken that morbid form. Observing that my eyes wandered to the razor, he said: "Never fear, Fred; I will not listen to that devil again."

By the razor was a Bible, with the name of the hotel stamped upon it—I seem to read it now—and it suggested to me what I thought an excellent idea.

"You talked of taking oaths," said I, "a minute ago. Well, you shall swear *that*, or else, as sure as you are still alive, I will call for help, and give you into custody for a madman. You dare not break an oath, I know, and indeed there was a time when your bare word would have sufficed me. Come, swear to me that you will never attempt your life again."

Cecil took the book, readily enough, then looked at me, as if in ignorance of how to proceed.

"You must do as the witnesses did in Batty's trial," said I.

"What did they do?" said he. "I have forgotten it."

I thought this a mere excuse for delay; for it seemed incredible he could have forgotten any incident in an affair so important to himself, and of which I remembered every detail.

"You must kiss the book," said I, "and say: 'I will

never attempt my life with my own hand again, so help me God.'"

He kissed the book, and repeated the words readily enough, but with this addition: "Unless circumstances should arise which should make it, in my Cousin Frederick's eyes, the best thing for me to do."

"That can never be," said I coolly, for I did not wish to excite him unnecessarily by remonstrance. He seemed to me to be standing on the very boundary-line between sanity and madness.

"If it can never be, Fred, then there can be no harm in making the proviso."

"Neither harm nor good," assented I. "You look very ill and worn, Cecil; I shall now leave you to your repose, in complete confidence in the word that you have passed to your Creator."

"Yes, yes; I will keep that," said Cecil slowly.

I would have shaken him by the hand then and there, and left him, but he insisted on accompanying me to the door of the sitting-room. As he did so, I saw his eyes glance anxiously at the letter on the desk, and lighten up as it fell on the unbroken seal; but though this pained me, as implying a doubt of my veracity, I took no notice of it. If there was much to forgive in my poor cousin's conduct, there was much reason for forgiveness; and I resolved to keep even from Aunt Ben what I had just seen and heard.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I will go with the Rest to-morrow."

FOR some days after the occurrence I have narrated, Cecil kept to his own apartments at the hotel, where I took an occasional meal with him alone; and before he felt sufficiently himself to revisit our house, an event

took place which, for the present, removed from it the chief cause of his disinclination to do so. A telegram arrived for Nelly from the Gatcombe doctor, desiring her immediate presence at her grandfather's bedside: the old man was dying, and had expressed an earnest wish to see her. Of course, she did not hesitate for a moment to obey such a summons; and as it was obvious she could not go alone, for many reasons—Sir Richard Harewood was still at the Manor-house, for one—Aunt Ben volunteered to accompany her, and what was a feat very creditable to the sex, which, with all its virtues, is apt to be a little slow in movements of departure, the two started off together within three-quarters of an hour of the receipt of the news. Thus it happened that Cecil and I were thrown more together alone than we had been even in the old Gatcombe days. Of course, after what had happened, I could not leave him to himself, even if I had wished to do so; and I did not wish it, partly on his own account, and partly because the only business of importance that called me from him gave me great embarrassment to pursue it; for the business was no other than the preparation of my play of the *Foot-page*, under the superintendence of Miss Brabant of the Corintheum, and the embarrassment arose from the fact, that Ruth was evincing a great desire to see Cecil —who was still unaware of my having discovered in the successful actress his old flame—and I had not the courage to tell her that his heart (though it might love her still, as of yore) was more steeled against her love than ever.

This change in her feelings towards him was caused, curiously enough, by the same event which had made him more obstinate not to press his suit; namely, the death of Jane. Even if the mystery of Richard Waller's fate should

be cleared up, there would still now remain, as my cousin had himself told me, a positive disinclination to meet Ruth, upon the ground of his dead sister's strong dislike to her; and this was not so pleasant a piece of news to communicate that I should willingly put myself in the way of having it extracted by cross-examination. That Ruth would cross-examine me, I was convinced; for she had already put some leading questions, which I had had some difficulty to answer, in the single interview I had had with her since Cecil's return. It was clear to me she wished to see him, and, as I thought, counted upon her novel charms—for her beauty was greatly heightened by tasteful attire and ornament, and her conversation had acquired, in the forcing-house of theatrical life, a piquancy quite incredible, considering the short space of time that had elapsed since she was a mere village girl—to quench the faint embers of morbid feeling that might still remain to him, now that Jane was no longer at his side to fan them and keep them aglow. What added to my perplexity still more, was that Cecil, on his part, was somewhat desirous to see Miss Brabant, albeit he would on no account have been present (though, goodness knows, rehearsals are not gaieties) even at the rehearsal of my play. It was astounding, now that we were left alone together, how his old interest in my affairs began to show itself. He made me tell him the whole lamentable story of the enactment of the *Pedlar's Pack* at the Hole-in-the-Wall, and was even won to smiles by its recital. Fortunately, the delays and mismanagement incidental to all theatrical proceedings postponed from week to week the bringing out of the *Foot-page*, and afforded an excuse for keeping Cecil and Miss Brabant apart; and in the mean time, circumstances were occurring at Gatcombe that might well demand my undivided attention.

When Nelly arrived at the Rectory, she found the old man speechless, and apparently dying, in consequence of a paralytic seizure. He knew her, it was plain, and seemed, by the expression of his distorted face, to welcome her; the designed mention of her name by the good doctor in his presence had indeed been the first thing to recall him to consciousness, and our old friend had thereupon taken the responsibility of telegraphing to us at once; but Mr. Bourne was quite incapable of communicating his wishes more particularly. He could not stir a finger-joint, nor voluntarily wink an eyelid. The frame of iron had given way in all its parts with simultaneous completeness; the will alone was left as strong as ever, but powerless. Others could read its existence in the anxious fire of his sleepless eyes, but they could not, or would not, translate it. His punishment had indeed begun; for what must such as he have suffered, to know himself about to perish without sign, his last consuming desire unsatisfied, his last command unobeyed, because not understood! That he was reconciled with his granddaughter was evident from the yearning glances that he threw towards her while she sat beside him, and the despairing look he wore whenever she left the room, even for a moment; and at last it struck the doctor that what lay so heavy on the sick man's mind must needs be in connection with her. Having come to this sagacious conclusion, he communicated it privately to Aunt Ben, with the following result (as I afterwards learned from her own lips).

"Man alive!" answered she impatiently, "do you suppose I do not know it, or that poor Nelly yonder does not know it? I can tell you much more than that. Do you not see how, when his eyes are not upon her, they rove to the big escritoire, in which he keeps his papers,

and from it to the fire-place, and back, and back again. He wants to burn his will!"

At this, the doctor slapped his knee so vigorously that it made Nelly start in her chair by the sick man's pillow.

"Miss Wray," said he, "Master Fred may be the genius of the family, but you've got all the common sense. You're right, no doubt. What a shame, and what a pity it seems! I suppose it would not be permissible to—eh? But, of course, it wouldn't."

"If one could give him speech but for one minute!" mused my aunt; "or, still better, strength to enable him to make half-a-dozen strokes with his pen, they would be worth ten thousand pounds apiece to Nelly yonder."

"If you promised me the money for myself, Miss Wray," returned the doctor gravely, "I could not do it."

"I know it," sighed she. "Then don't let us speak about it any more." And they did not; nor was it till years afterwards that Aunt Ben confided to me the bitter disappointment she had experienced on my account, and how very narrowly my Nelly had missed being a great heiress.

At last, the old man died; and his heaped-up wealth was found to be bequeathed to strangers. Most of it—curiously enough in one who had never cared in life for the respect of his fellow-men—was devoted to the preservation of his name as a public benefactor. Five thousand pounds went to the erection of the Bourne Fountain in the market-place of Monkton—a bronze erection of great pretensions, but which, in consequence of some complication in the machinery, is generally dry; a like sum was left to found a Bourne Chair of Political Economy in the Antipodes; and the rest fell to existing public

charities, always with the proviso that, year by year, remembrance should be made of him who gave it.

"To my granddaughter Eleanor Bourne, who has displeased me," was left the sum of one hundred pounds sterling; which subsequently purchased her *trousseau*.

All this was no worse than what I had expected for Nelly; and, as I told Cecil, I only blamed myself for having so long put off our marriage, in hopes of conciliating the old man.

"You are still but boy and girl, dear Fred," observed he quietly.

"While you will be of age in a few weeks," answered I, smiling, for I was fully resolved for the future to take all that he might say upon this matter in good part, if it should be possible to do so. "I can remember the time, Cecil, when you yourself thought of marriage, though younger than I am now. You had always money, to be sure; but there were as great obstacles in your case as the want of it: whereas, in ours, there is nothing else to hinder us; and even as regards means, we have enough to live upon in a simple way. Besides, who knows but that the *Foot-page* may turn out a gold mine!"

"That is true," said he thoughtfully; "who knows!"

It was a great comfort to me, upon Nelly's account, to feel that, though the idea of our marriage might be still distasteful to him, he had at least given up all thoughts of opposition to it. Notwithstanding this, however, I could see that the return of Eleanor from Gatcombe began at once to affect his spirits unfavourably, and that he soon shrank again, as before, within his shell of reticence and reserve.

But for this conduct upon Cecil's part, which gave me great pain, no matter how I strove to account for it, my life would now have been one of almost unmixed

happiness. My marriage with Nelly was fixed for the ensuing spring; and, in the mean time, the darling object of my labours for the last two years was about to be realised in the appearance of the *Foot-page* at the Corintheum. Old Magnus, who had proved so deaf and inexorable when he had had to deal with an unknown author, was like clay to the potter in the hands of "the Brabant," and was all civility to her protégé—myself. I could not help alluding to the little misadventure of the *Pedlar's Pack;* but he escaped from the subject in a glowing eulogium upon Lady Repton, through whose kind offices, it will be remembered, I had at last obtained from him the return of that pearl of plays, since cast upon the dunghill at the Hole-in-the-Wall. I had written to her ladyship to inform her of the acceptance of my present play, and reminded her of her promise to come up to town to see it brought out; and, much to my satisfaction, she had announced her intention of doing so. His lordship was laid up with a fit of the gout, but had given her leave of absence for a few days, which she was to spend under our own roof—a visit to which I looked forward with much greater pleasure than did her would-not-have-been hostess.

Dear Aunt Ben would as soon have parted with an article of her faith as with a prejudice; each one was vital with her, and she clung to it like a shipwrecked man to a buoy at sea. She was sometimes apparently convinced by argument, and the buoy went under—for a moment—but up it bobbed again the next, and there she was holding on by its rusty iron ring as fast as ever. Lady Repton was one of her "horrors." The rehearsals, to which an author was invited without his wife, was another. These performances, in sober truth, are, for the most part, neither meretricious nor attractive. To behold

a young lady in fashionable morning attire playing a foot-page of the epoch of the Restoration, is not a captivating spectacle; to find one's principal actor entirely mistaking the character he is called upon to play, and yet so vain and obstinate that it is impossible to correct him, and dangerous to call him a fool, is not to plunge into a vortex of pleasure; nor to any one short of a cynic is it agreeable to find oneself the modest pivot around which a system of naked jealousies and very thinly-clad downright hates revolve. The old man and his ass is a faint figure to image the position of a dramatic author at a rehearsal; for while it is not less difficult to please everybody than it was for the sage in the fable, it is absolutely impossible for him to please the ass.

However, this by the way, for our story concerns itself not with my affairs, but with those of Cousin Cecil. He visited us now more seldom than ever, and resolutely refused all invitations to partake of our little gaieties. Mr. Burder, for example, though he had not dared to show himself since that Southwark fiasco, would still send us occasional orders for the theatre; and although they were not good ones—being for the upper boxes and suchlike second-floor situations—we took advantage of them, and by paying the difference of price, obtained good places cheaply; an object which, with matrimony drawing near, it was become desirable to effect. Cecil would never accompany us on these occasions, and rarely even dined with us, unless we were quite alone. However, on the day of Lady Repton's arrival, which was that preceding the production of my play, I insisted upon his meeting so old a friend, and after some demur, he consented to do so.

Lady Repton looked not a day older than when I had last seen her, and was as sprightly as ever. She

gave some imitations of her husband during an attack of gout, which recur to my memory to this day, and never without filling my eyes with tears; they were not pathetic, however, in their character, especially when he was made to say to the footman: "I flatter myself I have some little reputation as a philosopher, and—damme, sir, take *that*" — which was the footstool which the valet had omitted to place at the proper angle. She was laboriously civil to Aunt Ben, patronised Eleanor; and flirted with myself in the most unblushing manner. The gloom and silence of Cecil seemed to act upon her like the presence of the skeleton at the Egyptian feast; or, perhaps, it was that they heightened her merriment by contrast. She rallied him upon his performance of Ivanhoe in the old days at Gatcombe, and demanded of him the loving allegiance that he owed to her as Rowena; but the allusion seemed only to awaken unpleasant memories, and was received with marked disfavour. Not a whit discouraged, however, her ladyship rattled on, chiefly upon that congenial theme, the stage. She had already overwhelmed me with questions about "this Brabant," as she called her, some of which had rather embarrassed me: "Was she really pretty, or only young, which seems to do as well in these days? Had she any idea of acting, or was she a mere walking doll?" &c. I answered all these questions as truthfully as I could, consistent with the desire to please her ladyship, who had evidently formed no very high opinion of her present successor to the throne of public favour. But when she put the question: "How does she dress?" I trembled because of Aunt Ben.

"O, Miss Brabant dresses with great taste," said I; "and, I am bound to say, always looks like a lady."

"Tut! I mean, how does she look as a *gentleman?*"

inquired her ladyship. "Your pet page is not in petticoats, I suppose; you must have had a dress rehearsal."

Now the fact was, that there *had* been a dress rehearsal that very afternoon, only I had not thought it worth while to mention it. Aunt Ben had been so foolishly particular, that I was quite glad to have been able hitherto to describe everybody behind the scenes as dowdy, commonplace, and unattractive; and besides, would not everybody have an opportunity of judging for themselves the very next night upon the question of attire? But Lady Repton was merciless, and I had to describe Miss Brabant's whole costume down to the chocolate tights, while my aunt pursed her lips, and even Eleanor wore two little blush-roses, which deepened into peonies when her ladyship told her "not to mind," since she (Lady Repton) had had personal experience that her Fred was faithful. "I fished for him myself, my dear, down at Gatcombe, and he never rose to the fly, nor even so much as nibbled." This was terrible enough, but there was worse coming, for the sprightly creature suddenly turned round to Cecil, with: "*You*'re going, of course, to-morrow night, sir, with the rest of us *claqueurs*?"

"No," stammered Cecil, turning quite pale beneath her flashing eyes. "I have no spirits for it. I think I shall be better at home."

"What!—not going to see your best friend's first piece brought out?" cried she impetuously. "Are you afraid of its being a failure, then? Why, that is only another reason why you should go, to give him the help of your hands."

"Indeed," said Cecil hastily, "I am not afraid of that. Fred has said himself, that if the play breaks

down, it will be his own fault; so that I feel quite certain of its success."

"Then why not go?" insisted her ladyship, who, to my great distress, was evidently getting angry upon my account. "If you are in bad spirits, that is no reason why you should neglect your duties—for it *is* a duty to see your friend through his first piece."

"Cecil has had a great trouble, you know, Lady Repton," whispered my aunt; "and it weighs upon him still."

"I know that well, my dear madam," replied her ladyship softly. "But, in my humble judgment, you are all going the wrong way to work with him." Then she whispered something into Cecil's ear which made him crimson. I guessed what it was, though I trust no one else did. She told him that if his sister Jane had been alive, the very woman for whose sake he was debarring himself from this pleasure, she would have been the first to have gone to see my play, and done her very best for it. "Come," continued she aloud; "you will not refuse me now, Mr. Cecil; I charge you, upon your allegiance."

And, to the surprise and horror of us all, Cecil answered humbly:

"Very well, Lady Repton. If you think it right, I will go with the rest to-morrow to see Fred's play."

She as little thought, of course (since we had not told her about Ruth), what she was asking him, as did he what he had consented to do.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The first Night of the "Foot-page."

It may be, and doubtless is, a vain and pitiful confession to make, but I honestly believe there are few

things so personally interesting in human affairs as is the first production of a play to its author. It has all the flutter and excitement of a first book, with that supplement of chance which gives whist its preëminence in interest over chess; for its first success or failure (if not its final fate) depends on many things quite independent of its merits—ability of the actors, the manner in which it is placed upon the stage, and the temper of the audience. Moreover, the mere novelist is unable to judge, except by the gradual evidence of circulation, whether his work has been acceptable or not; whereas the dramatic writer is crowned or sentenced off hand; every character he has drawn appears in flesh and blood before his judges, and is pronounced upon at once by sibilation or applause. The anticipation of all this is a very sufficient excitement for any young gentleman, especially if his future—so far as material prosperity is concerned—is to be affected, as mine was, by the result; and yet, I protest, that from the moment Cecil announced his intention of accompanying us to the theatre, my hopes and fears upon my own account were wholly swallowed up in my apprehensions upon his; for what might not be the effect upon one so sensitively organised, and in a state of mind so morbid and abnormal, in suddenly being confronted with the woman I felt sure he still adored, though he might not own it even to himself, under circumstances so strange and unexpected! Would he shrink into the corner of the box, with a cry of wonder or horror? Or would he leap from it on to the stage, and embrace his beloved object, regardless of her ruffles and tights? In either case, the incident would be too sensational not to divide the interest of the audience, to the detriment of the piece, and especially of its heroine. I could not, of course, but regard the matter as it affected Ruth as

well as Cecil. With what startling suddenness would the apparition of her old lover strike *her* also (since I had told her positively that he would not be present), and perhaps at the very moment when she most required all her professional wits; and yet, to send her word that he was coming was likely to unhinge her altogether, and not only produce the failure of the play, but damage, perhaps irretrievably, her favour with the public for the future! If this last consideration did not occur to Aunt Ben and Eleanor, they were excessively nervous, both upon my account and Cecil's; and if we had suddenly received news that the Corintheum was in flames, and insured (for, curiously enough, no one feels for the shareholders of an insurance office), I do believe it would have been welcomed by all three of us. Lady Repton, to whom "first nights" were familiar, and who had a friendly confidence in the merits of my play, which she had perused, was, on the other hand, in the highest spirits, and rallied us all on our pale faces.

"It'll go, Fred, it'll *go*," said she—meaning that the piece would take—"if only Miss Brabant understands her business. Dear me, if I was but a few years younger, how I should like to be in her place, and hear you thank me when all was over!—Eleanor, my dear, have you got a wreath for him? He will be led upon the stage by the manager, like a house lamb, you know, and have to bow with his hand, so. Then aim your wreath at him like a hoop at a *la grasse* stick.—Your heart is on the left side, remember, my dear Fred, and don't put your hand too low: but there, I daresay you have been practising it all the morning."

Her ladyship was quite in her element, for the stage was more than second nature with her, it was nature

itself, and even this indirect connection with it had all the effect upon her of a cordial.

We had an excellent box, in which the three ladies occupied the front seats, while Cecil and I sat as far back as I could put the chairs—a disposition such as I knew would please him, and which, little guessing the real cause, he set down to my modesty. The first piece was a farce, upon which Lady Repton passed sharp judgment, the severity of which I am inclined to think was partly owing to the fact that nobody recognised her. She had often bewailed to me how fleeting were dramatic reputations, however great; but perhaps she had not been without a hope that some old playgoers would have levelled their glasses in her direction, and jogging one another's elbows, whispered together that it was *She*. Those who looked towards our box, alas, were not old playgoers, but young ones, and the object of their attraction was Nelly.

At last the farce was over, and the curtain rose on the first scene of the *Foot-page*. I endeavoured to fix my eyes upon the stage, but as the moment drew near for the heroine to appear, I found them involuntarily wandering towards Cecil. A burst of applause informed me that Ruth had come forward, but I could not turn them from him; the expected scene from real life had more interest for me than the mimicry of the drama, although it was the child of my own pen. To my intense relief, though likewise to my great surprise, it was evident that Cecil did not recognise Ruth. He was staring at her with interest indeed, but without a spark of excitement, and presently he whispered smilingly: "She acts well, Fred, and does you justice."

The audience seemed to think so too, for the applause was loud and frequent. Even Lady Repton condescended

to remark that the young woman had something beside good legs to recommend her. "She paints but very slightly too, I perceive"—her ladyship's eyes were glued to her opera-glass—"but her hair is not her own, surely."

"It is not," said I, in a low voice; for Ruth was wearing black hair: of course, if she had not been doing so, Cecil must have recognised her immediately; and, even as it was, it struck me as most strange that the eye of love, proverbially so keen, should not have penetrated the disguise which had not baffled even me for long.

"I have seen that girl's face before," said her ladyship, as she closed her glasses.

"It is not likely," reasoned I coldly; "for she has not played in the provinces at all. She came out in town for the first time."

"I never forget a face," mused her ladyship, "and I have certainly seen hers; but where or when it was, I cannot call to mind."

I trembled; for if Lady Repton, who had only seen Ruth on one occasion—and that when she was carried out half-dead in Cecil's arms from the sand-pit at Gatcombe—began to have a glimmering recollection of her, would not the truth dawn, sooner or later, upon Cecil himself? Fortunately, however, he never levelled glass at her; and apparently satisfied with the general success of the play, paid no particular attention to the heroine after her first appearance. This indifference, and his position at the back of the box, might even, I began to flatter myself, cause him in his turn to remain unrecognised, because unseen, by Ruth. If she had caught sight of him already, at least, she must have been gifted with great self-control; for her whole intelligence had been apparently

absorbed in her part, which, indeed, she played to perfection. The piece, in short, was an unequivocal success; and at its close, after the actors had been summoned before the curtain, there arose from all sides that cry of "Author! Author!" which makes young ears to tingle and the young heart to beat, as much, perhaps, as any sound from human lips. It was of Nelly that I was thinking then, and of dear Aunt Ben, as, with eyes dew-bright with pleasure, they congratulated me, from their loving hearts, rather than of Cecil or of Ruth; and when, in obedience to this reiterated call, they made way for me to come to the front of the box, in order that I might make my bow, I was unaware that my cousin followed me, doubtless the better to observe the triumph of his friend. He did not see, nor did I see—though Nelly did—a white hand move the drop-scene aside, and a white face gaze out upon us from the stage, with all the pride and triumph faded out of it, and a wild and puzzled look in their place.

It was a moment in my life which, though I can never forget it, I have never been able to recall, as regards those details which generally imprint themselves on the memory so vividly on supreme occasions. I saw a sea of upturned curious faces; I heard a tumult of applausive voices, mixed with the clapping of hands; I felt that Aunt Ben was patting me on the back; I knew that Nelly was standing behind me somewhere, with the happy tears in her bright eyes; but I was aware of all these things only in a confused and dream-like fashion; and when a hand was placed on my shoulder, and my cousin's voice said, "You are wanted, Fred, behind the scenes," it was like waking from a dream.

A servant in scarlet (for the Corintheum affected splendour in its liveries, though its stage "properties"

enjoyed a well-earned reputation for economy and second-handedness) was standing at the door of the box.

"Miss Brabant wishes to see you for a moment, sir."

"Ah, that's the worst of it!" groaned Aunt Ben. She seemed to imagine that a dramatic triumph must always needs be purchased by a sacrifice of morality.

"Let Cecil go with him, and see that he is a good boy!" cried Lady Repton, laughing.—"Go, Cecil, go!"

I cannot guess (or, at least, I could not at that time) what it was that made my cousin so obedient to Lady Repton; but as he had come to the theatre at her command, so now he at once arose at her suggestion and moved towards the door.

"But he has not been asked," urged Nelly hastily —the first to recognise that, if this matter was carried out, the next moment would bring Ruth and Cecil face to face.

"Yes, yes, it was only my little joke," pleaded Aunt Ben earnestly; "of course there can be no harm in Fred's going alone."

"If you love your friend, Mr. Cecil, and have any regard for his good principles, you'll go with him now," said Lady Repton gravely, though in fits of laughter behind her fan.

"I will certainly go with him," said Cecil resolutely. He had no longer the appreciation of humour that had once distinguished him, but took everything that was said to him *au pied de lettre*.

"Very good," said I, not a little displeased with his pertinacity, and irritated by my aunt's folly. "Since he is so determined to make a fool of himself and me," thought I, "let him take the consequences." So we both followed the man in scarlet.

On the other side of the stage-door, I met Mr. Magnus

the manager; he held out both his "helping hands" to welcome me.

"This is a proud moment for you, Mr. Wray," said he. "I congratulate you heartily. I trust my company has fulfilled your expectations, and rendered your play to your satisfaction?"

"They have quite fulfilled my expectations," said I dryly, for they had not been very high; "but Miss Brabant has surpassed them."

"Ah, yes, she was glorious! I have just been telling her so. You will find her in the green-room."

She was not there, however, but in her own dressing-closet. Making a sign to Cecil that he should remain behind a little, I knocked at the door, and Ruth opened it with her own hands; she had not changed her stage-attire, and looked very pale, and less like herself than ever.

"You brought your cousin with you to-night," she began excitedly; "I wish to—"

"Hush!" said I; "he is here. He has not recognised you yet. He wishes to be introduced to Miss Brabant."

"Let it be done," said she, with a curious sort of defiance in her tone, which I was at a loss to understand; though it was natural enough that she should feel aggrieved with him—that her self-love should be wounded.

She stepped out at once, like a beautiful prince in a fairy tale, and stood with her plumed hat in her hand, while I beckoned to Cecil to come forward.

"This is Miss Brabant," said I, "the lady to whose talents I am indebted for the success of my little play."

He bowed politely, and murmured a few words of commonplace compliment. Cecil had given evidence, in the old days at Gatcombe, of his capacity for acting; but

if he was acting now, he would have been a greater than Kean or Kemble. It was perfectly certain that he did not recognise his old love. Wounded to the quick by this, as she well might be, Ruth yet retained her self-possession.

"Have you never seen me before, upon the boards?" asked she, in her stage-voice, and drooping her eyelids after the stage-siren fashion.

"Never," said he, "I am ashamed to say, before to-night. But I have long wished to have the honour of being introduced to a lady of whom I have heard my cousin here speak with such admiration and regard."

He spoke rapidly, and with an indifferent air—under the circumstances, indeed, almost a rude one—like a man who, paying a compliment at the expense of truth, does not even take the trouble to secure *vraisemblance*.

"But you have not seen Miss Brabant at all," returned she archly, and with a glance of piqued embarrassment at her male costume; "you have only seen the Foot-page. Now, if you will accompany your cousin to-morrow to Laburnum Villa—for I hope to get him there, to make a few verbal alterations in my part—I shall then have great pleasure in receiving you in my own proper character. I lunch at two; will that hour suit your convenience?"

"I am quite at my Cousin Fred's disposal," observed Cecil coldly.

"And *he* is bound to be at mine," interposed Miss Brabant hastily, just as I was about to frame an excuse; "so that point is settled.—I will not detain you now any longer," continued she, addressing myself, "because I know what troops of friends are always waiting to congratulate a successful author. I shall see you both to-morrow."

As she shook Cecil by the hand, she again repeated

her invitation. "*You* will not fail me, I trust, even if your cousin does?"

"I will come most certainly," said he; and this time I thought there was really something like warmth in his tone, though it might have been only decision. Was it possible that Ruth was about to attain the unparalleled triumph of winning my cousin's heart twice over—once as the simple village maid, and again as the accomplished actress? I felt well-nigh certain, from her behaviour, that that at least was the task which she had set herself to do, and also that she was confident of its accomplishment.

"The Brabant is very beautiful, Cecil," said I, as we retraced our steps through the labyrinth of narrow ways that led from that Rosamond's Bower of hers into the house. "Don't you think so?"

"I daresay many persons would do so," said he carelessly; "but, to my mind, she is only passably good-looking."

I felt morally certain that this reply was a hypocritical one, for, indeed, it could not have been natural in any man's mouth; and was more convinced than ever that her beauty had made a strong impression on him.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Speed, Hansom, speed."

THOUGH I woke next morning to find myself famous as the author of that highly-successful little drama, the *Foot-page*, the remembrance of my promise to take Cecil to Laburnum Villa weighed down my spirits, and filled me with a presentiment of evil. In vain Lady Repton read aloud at breakfast three-quarters of a column of eulogium from the Thunderer itself, Aunt Ben observing,

"Very true, I'm sure," at every laudatory adjective, and dear Nelly squeezing my hand under the table. As kings and laws are said to mitigate but little human distresses, so does public favour fail to remedy one's private grief. Amid all the praise and congratulation that poured in upon me that morning, I was sick at heart with the apprehension of the impending meeting between Cecil and Ruth. In the wild excitement of the preceding night, I had attached but slight importance to it, and had even, as I have narrated, been the very one to introduce her to him, though not in her proper person; but now, as I reviewed the matter calmly, I could hardly believe that I had played so rash a part, and, still worse, had undertaken to repeat it. Recognition (as it seemed to me by miracle) had not taken place on the first occasion, so far as Cecil was concerned; but it was quite certain to do so on the second. For some reason or other, which I could not fathom, Ruth was evidently bent upon discovering herself; and I knew the vigour and determination of her character too well by this time to doubt that, even if I refused to aid her, she would find other means to accomplish her purpose. As regarded Cecil, I positively dreaded, as the result of this interview, no less a calamity than the loss of his reason. His behaviour had been occasionally so very strange and unaccountable, his habits were become so peculiar, and he was altogether so altered from the man he had been, that the balance of his mind seemed to me to be most insecure, and liable to be destroyed by any shock. It may well be asked, if such were my apprehensions, how could I have so easily consented to let him accompany me to the theatre, far less behind the scenes, and into the very presence of Ruth herself. But as to the first, I had no possible excuse for dissuading him, since I had always pressed and urged

him to visit such scenes, in order to distract him from his melancholy; and as to the second, I can only reply, what I have already said, that I was half-demented myself by the excitement of my dramatic triumph.

When I now recalled his words and air in reply to my inquiry, six months ago or so, whether he would like to see Ruth again or not, I fairly trembled. It was just possible, it is true, that the approaching meeting might have the best possible effect upon my poor cousin. Love might once more resume its sway over him, and that with such passion and power as to sweep away all his morbid thoughts like cobwebs; but, on the other hand, the sight of Ruth might re-open the half-healed wound made by the accusation of Batty, and recall all the bitter memories of his more recent past as well. These last, indeed, seemed to be ever present with him, as it was; but while they were so, there was at least no room in his breast for other troubles. If the matter turned out ill, he would, naturally enough, reproach me with my deception; though, after all, that had been forced upon me. I had passed my word to Ruth not to disclose her identity to Cecil; and my cousin, on his part, had not only expressed but little anxiety on her account, but announced his determination not to see her, even should she be found. Their position in regard to one another was, in fact, inexplicable to me in both cases. While Jane was alive, Ruth had evidently acquiesced with cheerfulness in her separation from Cecil; and it would not, I verily believe, have much distressed her, had she been told that they were never to meet again. When Cecil returned without his sister, however, I felt sure that Ruth had desired her relations with her old love to be renewed; nor was I surprised at it, for reasons that I have already given. But what did astound me was, that, after she had seen him, and found

him so unlike his dear old self, so indifferent to their past—for what but indifference could possibly have rendered her unrecognisable to him?—and so consumed with sorrow for one in whose fate she had not only felt no pang, but even a sense of satisfaction and relief—I say what did astound me was, that *now* she should not only wish to see him, but should have insisted upon it, and even asked him to her own house.

Of one thing I was quite certain—that re-awakened love had nothing to do with it. If I had last night fancied—for I had scarcely been in a condition to use my judgment—that Cecil himself had been struck anew by the charms of Ruth in the person of Miss Brabant, the feeling had certainly not been reciprocal. She had been obviously annoyed and hurt by his conduct towards her; if her heart had been touched, she could never have coquetted with him as she had done. Then why did she want to see him? Perhaps only to take revenge upon him for his forgetfulness of her. And, indeed, at times he did seem to have forgotten her altogether. A curious instance of this had taken place with reference to the letters he had enclosed to me for Ruth, and which (it will be remembered) she had declined to receive, and bidden me burn. I had not burned them, because it struck me that if Cecil should come back to England, he would, naturally enough, demand from me their return; and when he did come back, and omitted to do so, I took an opportunity of reminding him that I was still in possession of them.

"Letters?" cried he, putting his hand to his forehead. "Letters that I wrote to Ruth? What letters?"

If he had asked, What Ruth? I could scarcely have been more astonished; but it was a peculiarity of his strange mental condition, and one which most caused us

apprehension, that his memory upon all subjects (except those connected with his sister) would suddenly fail him and become a blank. It is no wonder, then, taking all things into consideration, that I felt anxiety about this coming interview, and a very strong personal disinclination to be present at it. It was cowardly, no doubt; but after all, as I argued with myself, what good could my presence effect? If my cousin and Ruth should wish to throw themselves into one another's arms, my company would be very embarrassing to them; and if, on the other hand, they should upbraid one another, I had no apology to offer for either of them. I well knew what Aunt Ben and Nelly would have advised me to do in the matter, and what they would have done themselves—especially if they had known of Cecil's conduct that dreadful night at the hotel: they would not have deserted him in the coming ordeal. I did not, therefore, consult them in the affair, or tell them a word about it, and tried to persuade myself that it was to spare their feelings. "Surely," I now reflect, looking back upon that eventful day from quite another stand-point, "the old bond of friendship between my cousin and myself must have been much loosened, to have permitted me so to act;" and yet I was positively convinced that, notwithstanding the sad change in him for the worse, in all other respects—and even in his *manner* towards *me*—his affection for myself was to the full as warm and genuine as ever.

It had been arranged that I was to call for Cecil at his hotel at mid-day, and take him on with me to Laburnum Villa; but I now wrote him word that I would meet him there instead, for which a fortunate excuse offered itself in the departure of Lady Repton, whom it was no more than bare politeness that I should accompany to the railway station; and this I did. She was very

sorry to leave us, for (with the exception of my cousin) she had probably found us more genial associates—for my Aunt Ben forgot all her dislike when playing the hostess—than she was wont to meet with at her own stately home, and had parted from Nelly especially with effusion. She was full of her praises, and profuse in her auguries for our future happiness; and in acknowledging them, I expressed my regret that my poor cousin had not the good-fortune to possess an Eleanor, who might while him from his melancholy mood back to his old self.

"He *did* have a *tendresse*, as you have doubtless heard, years ago at Gatcombe, with that beautiful creature whom he rescued from the sand-cave, Ruth Waller."

"That's the name, and now I've got it!" cried Lady Repton triumphantly.

"Got what?" said I, affecting to misunderstand her, though I guessed pretty well what was coming.

"Well, upon my word, Master Fred, you *must* be in love. Cupid is blind, one knows, but I always thought his blindness was only in reference to the beloved object. But no—" Here she stopped, and looked exceedingly disconcerted. "And yet, of course, *that* could not be the case either, or else your cousin would have known her."

"Known whom?"

"Well, I was just on the point of discovering a mare's-nest. The fact is, as I sat at the play last night, I was haunted by the recollection of some face—I could not remember whose—in connection with Miss Brabant; and when you mentioned Ruth Waller, I seemed all of a sudden to have found the key to it."

"So you have," said I, smiling. "Miss Brabant *is* Ruth Waller; only, you must keep it a dead secret, please, for *all* our sakes."

"For all your sakes?" repeated Lady Repton gravely.

"I am sorry for this, Fred; I am more sorry than I can say. I am not a strait-laced person, my dear boy—don't lace half tight *enough*, indeed, as some people say—but I don't like such goings-on as these. Young men will be young men, I know; but that's a phrase that is made use of to excuse a deal of villany. Under your aunt's roof, and with Eleanor by your side, you should not, in my opinion, be playing into your cousin's hands in this way. If he likes the girl, there is no excuse—since he has plenty of money—for his not marrying her. I was an actress once myself, and perhaps that makes me feel strongly upon the point; indeed, I should not like to say to you *what* I feel about it, Master Fred, because we might quarrel; but if that girl goes to the bad, remember, it will be partly your fault. I honestly believe that I should be only doing my duty if I wrote to your Aunt Benita, and told her the whole story—for you may be sure I know it."

These words were delivered with such amazing volubility and indignation, that I was quite unable to interrupt them; but while she stopped to take breath, I hastened to set her right.

"If you wrote to Aunt Ben to-morrow, my dear Lady Repton, you could tell her no news; both she and Nelly know that Miss Brabant and Ruth are the same person. It is only my cousin who is not aware of it."

"Cecil not aware? Your cousin Cecil not know it?" Her ladyship looked aghast.

"Last night was the first time, I should have told you, Lady Repton, that my cousin had had the opportunity of seeing Ruth since he left Gatcombe. We had purposely concealed from him the fact of her identity with Miss Brabant; and but for you, he would never have gone to the play at all, or run the chance of meeting her. I was

not surprised that he did not recognise her upon the stage; but afterwards, when he insisted upon accompanying me behind the scenes, I confess I thought he could not fail to have done so. Yet I am bound to say that I was myself in her company for a quarter of an hour, when she was less disguised, too, than yesterday, and on that occasion she deceived *me*, though, like yourself, I had a vague recollection that I had seen her, or some one like her, elsewhere."

"*You?* Yes, that might be," exclaimed Lady Repton scornfully. "But nothing will persuade me that she deceived your cousin. He may have had his reasons for ignoring her, but that he did know her is certain. Depend upon it, he has some design in it—not a very creditable one, perhaps. Do you know, Fred," added she gravely, while I was turning over this novel view of the subject in my mind, "I never saw so great a change in any man for the worse as in your cousin Cecil. I don't speak of his mere melancholy, but his whole nature is soured and distorted. He seems to have no affection left for any one, except it be for *yourself*, and he cannot have much of that, since he thought of absenting himself from the first night's performance of your play."

"Nay, but," said I thoughtfully, "in case you are right in your impression that Cecil is not deceived as to Ruth, but only pretends to be, he may have discovered who she was long ago, and declined to attend the performance on that very account. As there are none so deaf as those who don't wish to hear, he, of course, gave no sign of recognition; but then, again, he would surely have refused, even at your bidding, to go with me, as he did, into her very presence. Besides, he has accepted her invitation to go and see her to-day at her own house."

"Alone?" asked Lady Repton; "or in your company?"

"Well, he was to have gone with *me;* but the fact is, I—I—"

"You got out of it," said her ladyship quietly. "You thought there might be some unpleasant scene, and therefore made use of my departure as an excuse to avoid it. That is so like a man! Your father, however, would not have done so, Master Fred. What time were they to meet?"

"At one," said I. "Cecil is very punctual, and has already seen her, without doubt."

"I am sorry for it," observed my companion sententiously.

There was an unmistakable look of alarm in her expressive features.

"Well," said I, "they must either quarrel or make it up. It can be nothing very serious, after all."

"I don't know that, Fred," said she slowly. "The only tragedy of real life to which I was ever a witness, took place under some such circumstances as the present. If your cousin has recognised Ruth, he must have some very strong reason for ignoring her; while she, on the contrary, must be bent indeed upon *her* purpose (whatever that may be), to have thus invited him to her own house, after the slight he has put upon her. It will be a terrible interview, you may depend upon it. There will be bitter recriminations and stinging words. Heaven grant there may be no worse!"

"What!" said I; "do you suppose that Cecil is capable of harming a woman, and especially one that he has once loved, as he did Ruth, nay, whom, moreover, as I believe, he still loves?"

"If he still loves, he would not avoid her," returned my companion; "nor, on the other hand, would he fail to know her. No, no; he loves her not, Fred. But it is not of Cecil that I am afraid, but *for* him. We women,

when we are injured, are very dangerous; we have this much of the nature of the serpent that tempted our first mother—when trodden on, we turn and bite."

"Great Heaven!" cried I. "Do you mean that, in her passion, she might stab him?"

"I do," said she quietly; "and I know some that would forgive her if she did. He is an altered man, even we ourselves admit; but what must he appear to *her*, to whom he paid his vows, and promised to be faithful until death! So changed in two short years, that he repudiates her to her face, as we cut a disagreeable acquaintance in the street!—Yes, Fred, you are right!" I had pulled the check-string while she was speaking, and stopped the brougham. "You must see to this at once; and Heaven grant that you may find all well with both of them!"

With a hearty clasp of the hand, I left my companion to pursue her way with her maid (whom she called in from her seat upon the box), and jumped into a hansom cab. How bitterly I reproached myself with my selfishness in not having accompanied my cousin that morning! I felt that Lady Repton's words were weighty in any case; but in this (when the idea of violence was once presented to me), how natural it seemed that a girl like Ruth, impulsive and hot-blooded, though capable, as I knew, of deep and generous feeling, might be hurried into some rash act she might regret her whole life long, but for which she could never make atonement! They must already have been an hour together, and I was at least half an hour's drive from Laburnum Villa. My driver did his best, and urged his horse (it was a white one, and I well remember how his hairs came out, and covered me like a snow-storm) to his full speed; and yet I seemed to have never been driven so slowly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Inexplicable.

WHEN I came in sight of Laburnum Villa, it was a positive relief to me that there were at least no external signs of a catastrophe; that its white walls shone brightly in the sun, unstained by blood; that there was no crowd within its well-ordered little garden, no clamour about its porched door. Everything, indeed, looked much as usual, except that the drawing-room window was closed, which it was Ruth's habit to keep open almost throughout the year, her old Gatcombe habits of outdoor life making fresh air indispensable to her. Perhaps they were sitting in that very room together, reconciled, and only waiting for my friendly voice to congratulate them on their happiness; perhaps— But I did not dare to picture to myself what my heart foreboded. It struck me that the house was stiller than usual; the cook was not singing at her work below-stairs, as was generally the case; nor was the gaily-dressed little *soubrette*, Fantine, at the lower window, on the look-out for the baker or the policeman. At the thought of the policeman, quite a shudder ran through me, and I rang the bell with a trembling hand. The servant was much longer than usual in replying to my summons; but she came at last, looking pale and disturbed, and without the smile with which she generally favoured me, as a dramatic author patronised by her young mistress.

"Miss Brabant is not at home this morning, sir," said she, in answer to my inquiry.

"That is impossible," said I: "I had an appointment with her for one o'clock."

"Yes, sir; so she said. But since you did not come

in time, she went out immediately after lunch. She bade me say that she was very sorry to have missed you."

"Did she go out alone?"

"Yes, sir; no lady has called this morning."

The manner with which this remark was made was even more worthy of admiration than the sentiment it conveyed: it would have become the mouth of the *concierge* of a nunnery.

"A *gentleman* has called to-day, as I happen to know," replied I quietly, "for we were to have come together. Now" (here I slipped five shillings into Fantine's hand), "is he here still, or has he gone?"

"He has gone, sir—upon my solemn oath," returned the girl, desirous doubtless of giving a full measure of assurance to so liberal an inquirer.

"But your mistress is in, Fantine, I feel convinced."

"She *says* she is not, sir," returned the girl naively; "and I suppose she ought to know." Then she added with sudden gravity: "The truth is, she *is* in, Mr. Wray; but she cannot see anybody. Something—I don't know what—has terribly upset her. She cannot see even *you*, or attend to business of any sort."

"But it is not business about which I am come, Fantine; it is something quite different—something connected with the very matter which you say has distressed her; and I hope to do her good."

"Then come in, sir, in Heaven's name!" said Fantine with a sudden collapse of her bright manner, and bursting into tears. "My dear mistress is quite beside herself about something or other. It's all, as I believe, on account of that black young gentleman as called this morning, and whom you say you know. How ever my mistress could allow herself to be put out for a party of that kind!—for my part, I should as soon think of break-

ing my heart for an African Serenader! But there, so it is; and if you can bring her any comfort, I'm sure you'll be welcome, though she did say: 'Not at home, Fantine; not even to Mr. Wray.'"

With that compliment, so delicately insinuated, and with a look to match that seemed to say, "Black or white, there is nobody she loves like you," the damsel swept away her tears with the back of her plump hand, and ran up-stairs. She was a long time absent, during which I heard whispered talk in the drawing-room above; but at last she returned with a sealed envelope addressed to myself. I broke it open, and read these words: "You had better not see me, Mr. Fred, *much* better not, I think. If, however, after that expression of my opinion, you still deem it right to press your request, come up." This note did not give me a moment's hesitation. I could easily imagine that the interview would be a painful one to both of us; but I was resolved not to shirk my duty a second time. I motioned to Fantine to lead the way up-stairs.

"She is so altered that you will scarcely know her," whispered the soubrette sorrowfully. "She has already sent to the theatre to excuse herself from acting to-night."

Fantine had not exaggerated the change in her mistress's appearance, as she held out her hand to greet me, without moving from the sofa on which she lay. Her eyes were red with weeping; and over her face, streaked with the traces of tears, her hair fell in tangled masses. When she had worn those false black tresses, she had not looked so little like herself as she did now with her own.

"I am very sorry, Rue," said I, "to see you thus. I was not without hope that, in place of this misery, I should have found all well."

She shook her head, with such a sick despairing smile as was far worse than tears.

"Come, Ruth," said I, taking her hand, which was quite cold, in mine; "I cannot but think that you take too gloomy a view of matters. I wish I had been here when Cecil came."

"You? No, no; I am glad you were not," returned she with a sort of shudder. "I am sorry you came now —so soon; I am not equal to it."

"I am sorry too, dear Ruth," said I, "if that be so. I should not have come, after the note you sent me down, but that I thought so old a friend as I—a common friend to both—might be of use to heal a breach, or—"

"There is no breach," interrupted she impatiently. "I cannot tell you what has happened; but it is nothing that you can guess."

"Dear Ruth," said I, "forgive me if I seem officious or importunate; but I owe it not only to yourself, but to poor Cecil, to do my utmost in this matter. I feel that I myself have been to blame—"

"No, no," she interposed again in a fretful tone; "you are not to blame. You have done no harm. You can do no good."

"Nevertheless," continued I, "at the risk of your displeasure, Ruth, which I should be very sorry to incur, I must say a few words. I am the only friend that my cousin has now left to him, and bound to speak on his behalf. I feel sure that whatever he has said to-day, or however strange his previous conduct may have seemed to you, he loves you in his heart. I know his nature well, and though it has doubtless suffered from the shock of his sister's death, he will be himself again one day—the same true, faithful, earnest-hearted man he was. He is still loyal to you. I have seen him among others of your

sex, not so beautiful as yourself indeed, but fair and young, who, aware of his great wealth, have shown their willingness to share it with him—to become his wife; and they might as well have smiled upon a marble statue."

"I can believe it," said Ruth quietly.

"It *is* so, on my soul!" continued I. "He loves no other woman in the world but you, nor will he ever love one."

She did not contradict me, but only closed her eyes, as though to shut out my appealing looks, and sighed.

"There are two things alone, Ruth, that bar him from making you his own: the one, that cloud of mystery which still hangs over the fate of your poor brother; the other, a morbid feeling in connection with his sister Jane, whose opposition to your marriage he seems strangely enough to respect in death more than he did in life. As to the first, I must confess that it appears to me unlikely that the secret, if there be one, will now be ever revealed. Nay, Cecil himself is of that opinion, for he told me so."

"And so am I," said Ruth.

Her tone was so gravely confident—which on this point it had never been before—that I turned amazed towards her; but she had put her handkerchief to her eyes, doubtless to dry the tears which my reference to her brother's death had caused to flow afresh, and its folds concealed her features.

"And yet," urged I, "he has never referred to the matter since his return to England, except upon that one occasion, whereas of old he used to talk and write of nothing else. From this I gather hope that time is weakening the hold of that event upon his mind."

I paused, but Ruth did not reply.

"You do not deny this, Ruth. You think with me that he is getting over it?"

"It may be so," said she, still keeping her face concealed. "But that would make no difference." She did not speak with the despairing calm that seemed to fit such a reply, but with quiet coldness, as though she were only stating a matter of fact.

"But if it *is* so," urged I, "then one of these two obstacles is being removed, however slowly; and is it to be supposed that this much more morbid and unnatural feeling with respect to Jane will endure when *that* is gone, or so strongly as to condemn him to loveless solitude?"

She was gazing at me now with a strange weird look, quite new to her fair face, so long as I had known it; and with a strange harsh voice she made reply: "Have you said your say? have you quite done? I have listened very patiently, though your words were torture. It would be no use, I told you; and it *is* no use. Pray, leave me, Master Fred." The touch of tenderness implied in the use of my old name gave me still a gleam of hope.

"Dear Rue," said I, "by the memory of those old days in which he wooed you first, I beseech you, do not steel your heart against my unhappy cousin. However you may wrap yourself in scorn and coldness, I am well convinced that he is dear to you as you to him. Come, once for all, do you not love poor Cecil?"

She burst into a flood of passionate tears, then turned upon me with angry vehemence. "You are cruel and unkind," sobbed she, "and I will hear no more. It is too much, too hard! I cannot bear it! What is it that you want to hear, sir? Are you anxious to watch every pang—like some hard-hearted doctor, who dissects a miserable creature while it is still alive—in order that you

may set them down in writing, for your plays? I have told you, or if I have not done so, I tell you now, that all is over between your cousin and myself!—that we shall never meet again this side the grave!"

I rose, alarmed as well as shocked. She spoke like one possessed, so that her tidings, grievous as they were, were made thrice as positive and hopeless by the tone and air with which they were conveyed.

"This is bad news indeed, Ruth," said I. "I did not understand that matters had gone so far and so ill, or I would not have pained you by a fruitless interference. Cecil, at least, shall be saved, at your expense, from similar distress—unless, indeed, you should wish me to urge anything from you."

"There is nothing to urge, nothing to say," said she, now quietly enough, and indeed she seemed quite spent and weary; "all is settled for the best, however bad; and besides, you will not see him more."

"*I* not see him? You surely must be dreaming, Ruth."

"If so, it is a ghastly dream," was her reply. "No, you will never see your cousin more; but he will write to you. Whatever his letter may ask you to do—however strange his request may seem—accede to it; and ask no more questions, at least of me."

With these last words upon her lips, she fell back on the cushion—on which she had been supporting herself upon her elbow—exhausted and half-fainting. I ran to the door and summoned Fantine, who, seeing her mistress's condition, cast upon me a reproachful glance.

"A gentleman should know when he is not wanted," said she indignantly. "I told you how it would be. Perhaps you can let *yourself* out at the hall-door." A hint

which, too remorseful to be chapfallen, I hastened to obey.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Cecil's Farewell.

It might be thought that, after so strange an interview, in which nothing was cleared up as respected my unhappy cousin, and yet everything placed on a new footing, I should have repaired to his hotel at once. But the fact was, that I was fairly panic-stricken by Ruth's last words, which had a dread significance for me, of which she did not dream. That neither she nor I was to see Cecil more, though I was to receive a communication from him by letter, could surely mean nothing else but that Good-bye which he had already meditated, and been on the very point of saying months ago, namely, his Farewell to Life itself. The letter had been written *then*, and, for all I knew, had not been destroyed; in that case, he would only have to leave it out upon his desk, as before, and complete the act which I had only delayed. If my apprehension was well grounded, my cousin was no longer among the living; and if he was dead, "Let my eyes," thought I with a shudder, "be not the first to look upon him!" The excitement of the last few days must be my excuse for this moral cowardice. I felt completely unhinged; weary, and yet full of thoughts that denied me a moment's rest.

Utterly without confidence in myself, I drove rapidly home, determined to make Aunt Ben the judge of what was proper to be done, and deeply regretting that I had not taken refuge in her commonsense before; but on reaching home I found both my aunt and Nelly had gone out for a long day's shopping—in connection with the

dear girl's *trousseau*, as I now remembered—and would only return in time for dinner. To apply my mind to writing or reading—far less to sit down unoccupied, and let my fancy take its wild weird way—was not to be thought of; moreover, I did not wish to be alone in the house when that letter should arrive, which, in all probability, was already on its way. I started, therefore, to walk, I cared not whither, so long as it was in the crowded streets, with all the noise and stir of life about me, to distract my thoughts. In this, however, they so little succeeded, that within the first five minutes I found myself opposite Cecil's hotel, and looking up at the window of his bedroom, and lo, it was as red as blood! It is a shameful confession to make, but for an instant I shuddered with horror; nor even when I reflected that the sinking sun was flaming against the pane, did I escape from the ideas to which the fright had given birth. To what ghastly sight, in yonder chamber, thought I, might not those rays be a witness!

Had I not seen him once with my own eyes, a staring dreadful figure, with neck half bare, and the shining weapon in his hand, about to cut the knot of the mystery of life? and now, perhaps, he had done it, and the heart that had once beat in such unison with my own, was stifled for ever, and the gracious lips for ever dumb! What would I not have given to see him come to the window, or even to see another there, though it were but the unconcerned face of the inn servant! All seemed so lonely and desolate up there, and yet I did not dare to invade its solitude. I went home again with feverish haste, to ask if any letter had come for me; and finding none, then out again, this time for a long walk at speed, in the opposite direction. But I could not escape from the spectre I had raised in my own mind. In a by-street in

Pimlico, a street-hawker froze my blood by crying: "*Mysterious murder in a West-end 'otel—mysterious murder!*"—for might not Cecil's suicide be thought to be a murder, or the man have called it so, to make his broad-sheet the more saleable? It was, of course, impossible that the catastrophe I dreaded to hear of could, even if it had happened, be by this time in print; and yet I felt relieved when the fellow went on to roar out: "*All for love*—his sweetheart having perished by *drowning* in the river Lea." As I passed the Corintheum, there was a grumbling crowd about its pit-door. "If I'd a-known she didn't hact to-night," said one, "I'd never have come;" and "What's the play without *'er* in it?" growled another. The uncomplimentary comment upon my drama did not wound me; but the mention of Miss Brabant's absence recalled to me its cause with renewed alarms. How thankful was I, when I got home, to hear from the servant that "the ladies had returned," for a letter was lying on the hall-table for me in Cecil's handwriting, and, if I had been alone, I felt that I should have lacked courage to open it. I took it up with a trembling hand, and carried it with me into the drawing-room, under pretence of getting more light to read it by; and even then I was glad to defer doing so, and affected to listen with interest to Aunt Ben's triumphant account of her good bargains.

"We have been very economical, but also highly successful—have we not, Nelly?" said she.

And Nelly corroborated her with becoming enthusiasm. Not till we had dined—for what was the use of spoiling *their* dinner, though, for my own part, I only made-believe to eat, and could scarcely swallow a mouthful—did I produce the letter; and after premising shortly what had happened at Laburnum Villa, proceed to read it.

"By the time you receive these lines, dear Fred," it began, "I shall have left London, never to return to it, nor to see any of you in this life again."

Here I stopped, breathless, not with surprise, but with that sharp sense of relief that is akin to pain, and deeply thankful that matters were no worse.

My aunt, on the other hand, seemed turned into stone with astonishment. "Good Heavens!" ejaculated she, "what is the poor lad after now? He must have taken leave of his senses altogether."

"How very, very sad this is!" said Nelly; the tears rose in her bright eyes; she was pitifully contrasting, as I guessed, her own exceeding happiness, with the wretchedness and desolation that poor Cecil's words bespoke.

"This is not a resolution of the moment, beloved cousin," the letter went on to say, "but one that I have had in my mind for long. I am unfit to be with you in my present state; whenever I enter your pleasant home circle, it is to damp its mirth, and chill its sunshine: and yet it is not for your sake that I withdraw myself from it—irrevocably, inexorably—but for my own. To say that I shall be happier alone than in your company, would be a mockery, for I never am, nor can be happy; but I feel that it is better for me to be alone. You must be content with that excuse for my conduct, for I have no other. You may imagine that my motive for thus estranging myself lies, somewhere, in the interview which I have this day had with Ruth; but that is not so. I should have bidden you 'good-bye' a little later, perhaps; but it would have come to pass all the same. I do not reproach you for not having told me about Ruth; she has taken all

blame, if there be blame, on herself, and doubtless with justice, though the shock to which I have been subjected was, as you will understand, most terrible. If my last wishes are dear to you, you will forbear to interrogate Ruth upon this matter: her lips are sealed, except so far as to corroborate, if it be necessary, the fact that I have left my native land for ever. It is useless to search for me; and to know that you were doing so, would only be to add another grief to the heavy burden that I must carry to my grave. Enough of that sad subject—my wretched self. Let me now speak of your own affairs. The one bright gleam in my dark life, since I returned to England, has been, my beloved cousin, the success which has dawned at last upon your dramatic future: that it may grow and grow, and your fame with it, is my most earnest wish. If I could hope that it would do so in proportion to your deserts, there would be no necessity for what I am about to add; but though merit so often gains the reward it deserves upon the stage, the playwright himself does not always reap it."

"That is not like Cecil," observed Nelly thoughtfully.

"That is true," said I, reperusing aloud the laboured passage; "but, then, we must remember that Cecil is not like himself."

"No, indeed," said my aunt, sighing. "To think that he should have ever taken such delight in law and lawyers! I believe that Mr. Clote did him a deal of harm by making him think so much of his money: depend upon it, that will now become the poor lad's hobby-horse; he will care for nothing else, and die a miser."

"Hush!" said I softly. "Do not judge him harshly. Here is something, Aunt Ben, which, at least, will clear him of *that* charge." And I read out as follows:

"Dramatic success, however great, will at all events never bring you a fortune, and without, at least, good means, I am sure, dear Fred, you are not the man who ought to marry. I have distressed you once by speaking on this subject, but you must not misunderstand me now, as you did then; I had never any end in view beside your happiness, and—since your happiness is bound in hers—that of your Eleanor."

"Now, that again is very unlike Cecil," remarked my aunt: "there is not a word of kindliness for Nelly herself."

"Nay, but *this* is like him," said I—"just like his old Gatcombe self. Listen!"

"In order, therefore, to insure for you material prosperity, I have arranged certain matters with Mr. Clote, with which I earnestly entreat your compliance. There was a time when there would have been no sense of obligation in either of us at receiving a favour at the other's hand: recall it now, dear Fred, and feel none in receiving one at mine. What use have I for money? Even if it could buy me friends, it would be of no service, since I wish to live alone. I have reserved to myself what is amply sufficient for my needs. With the rest, if you oblige me by accepting it, I shall have purchased happiness—the happiness of making another happy, who is still dearer to me, Fred (you may always be sure of that), than my own life. Mr. Clote will call, and communicate to you the particulars. Do not, I beseech you, refuse the only proof of friendship—though it may seem a gross one—that it is now in my power to show you. The same reason, or unreason, if you choose to

call it so, that exiles me from you and England, makes me also averse to carry on any correspondence; your letters would only bring once more before my eyes long-banished joys, and wake again regretful memories. If you have, however, serious occasion to write to me, Ruth will always be in possession of my address.—Adieu, dear Fred, adieu for ever! May all happiness attend you, is the constant prayer of your affectionate CECIL."

For a full minute after I had finished this epistle none of us spoke, so busy were we all with our own surmises or suspicions.

"The poor dear fellow is mad," sighed I at last.

"If his head is amiss," observed Aunt Ben thoughtfully, "he shows, at least, that his heart is sound. I wonder what sort of arrangement he has made with Mr. Clote in your favour?—A very handsome one, I'll be bound."

"My dear aunt," said I gravely, "I trust you do not think me capable of taking advantage of it in any case?"

"And why on earth should you not, Fred? Your poor cousin has obviously no use for all his money, while even a small slice of it would be of the greatest benefit to you and Eleanor. For my part, I think it does Cecil immense credit to have thought of making you such an offer at a time like this, instead of waiting, as most folks would be content to do, for the opportunity of presenting a silver fork and spoon. It is when a young couple are without experience in cutting and contriving, and just setting up for themselves, that they stand most in need of such help—not when they have settled down, and learned how to cut their coat according to their cloth. I think it a great proof of common-sense in Cecil."

"And yet, my dear aunt," urged I, unable to repress a smile at the queer logic which her love for her nephew and prospective niece had suggested to Aunt Ben, "you have just admitted that Cousin Cecil's wrong in his head."

"Well, well," returned the old lady impatiently, "he can't help *that*. We ought to be thankful that his madness has not driven him in the other direction, the same that was taken by old—" I knew she was within a hairsbreadth of saying "old skinflint," for she turned the same colour as her cap-strings, which were purple, as she corrected herself with: "Taken by poor old Mr. Bourne, you know—our dear Eleanor's grandfather. And this I will say, that, if you don't take the money, you are ten times madder than your cousin Cecil is or ever will be. Why, I suppose if he had given you a handsome marriage present, you would not have been too proud to accept that; and what is this but a marriage present, made a few weeks in advance?"

"That would be a very different matter, Aunt Ben," said I; "for, if I don't mistake, this letter of Cecil's conveys an offer of such a sum of money as it is quite out of the question that I should accept. However, I have no doubt that we shall see Mr. Clote to-morrow, and he will tell us all about it."

"He won't accept it, my dear," observed Aunt Ben to Eleanor, in a very loud "aside." "I know poor dear Fred so well. He is just like his father before him—quite mad about money matters. The Wrays all pique themselves upon not thinking much of money; upon not bowing down to the golden calf, as other people do; and yet they must think there is something very sacred about the animal too, or they would not make such a fuss about accepting a loin or a shoulder as a present from a friend."

"And yet you are a Wray yourself, Aunt Ben," returned Eleanor, smiling; "and, if I am not much mistaken, would be quite as unwilling as Fred, if you were placed in his position—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the old lady angrily. "I thought you were a more reasonable person. If your poor old grandfather could hear you taking up with such opinions, it would make him turn in his grave. You pretend to think with that foolish boy, just to please him; and if you do that now, when you are your own mistress—mark my words—when you are married to him you will be his slave!"

While this sharp admonition was in progress, there had come a ring at the front-door bell; and at this moment our handmaiden entered with an address-card. "This gentleman wishes to see you, sir, upon important business." On the card was printed "Mr. Clote, Gray's Inn."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Eleanor's Scissors.

I HAD seen Mr. Clote years ago at Gatcombe, where he had come upon business immediately after the arrival of my cousins from India, and he now looked pretty much the same as he had done then: a small, spare man, with a skin like parchment, and not a trace of hair upon it, he seemed to bid defiance to Time. We had got on very well together of old, though we had nothing in common; he was very frank, and had had the courage to confess his antipathy to a country life, his contempt for horses, and his disbelief in exercise and fresh air. They had never done him any good, he said (though I doubt if he had given them a fair chance), and he was

always well in his chambers at Gray's-inn. As he was there for seven hours every week-day, for about fifty weeks in the year, it must be allowed that he had very good health—a fact which he mainly attributed to "never putting anything that was not warm into his stomach." But I don't think he enjoyed it. He enjoyed nothing, by his own confession (which I have no reason to disbelieve), except attending to business, and letting-off little jokes, generally at his own expense. Literature, he was wont to say, was a dead letter to him. "Deeds, not Words," was his motto. With this facetious account of his opinions he was greatly pleased, and repeated it often: doubtless his clerks always laughed at it, and it was considered in their salaries; for he was a kindly and open-handed little fellow; though, to look at him, you could have scarcely called him flesh and blood.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Fred—glad to see the ladies: they need not leave us;" for both my aunt and Nelly were pruning their wings for flight to the drawing-room at the sight of Mr. Clote, who had a reputation for contemning the fair sex as well as exercise and fresh air. "My business is not of a private nature; indeed, it is not business at all, in a high sense, being an affair of sentiment. The ladies will doubtless understand it; I confess *I* don't. However, I have excellent news for you, Mr. Fred; though, perhaps, it is no news after all." (His quick eye had fallen on my cousin's letter.) "Mr. Cecil has written, has he?"

"He has written," said I, "to offer me, as I understand, some portion of his property."

"Some portion!" echoed the little lawyer. "When you give your aunt a slice of plum-pudding, you don't call the pudding some portion, do you, but the slice? Well, Cecil has given away his pudding—thirty thousand

pounds or so—and kept the slice—some five thousand pounds, little more than his sister's share—for himself."

"Thirty thousand pounds!" cried I; "that is incredible."

"Mr. Fred, here's the deed of gift."

And Mr. Clote produced a parchment covered with cabalistic signs and seals.

"Well, and what do you think of it all, Mr. Clote?"

"Think of it? Why, that you are a deuced lucky fellow!"

"Yes. But what do you think of Cecil? He gave you his instructions personally, as I conclude. Do you not think him, to say the least of it, very eccentric?"

"Of course; but not more so than a man who lives in the open air and gives himself up to exercise is liable to become. At Gatcombe, he was always flying through space upon a leaping-pole, like a witch on a broomstick; in South America, he rode wild horses, as I understand; in Switzerland, he climbed the mountains before sunrise: this is what comes of it all. But he is perfectly sane in the eye of the law, if you mean *that*. Moreover"—I am sure this was in reply to some expression of opinion conveyed by my aunt's face, though I did not catch it—"the money would be sure to come to you or yours sooner or later, if your cousin does not marry, as he protests he never will. He is a very sensible young fellow so far—begging your pardon, Miss Bourne. I meant, that since there are certainly not two Miss Bournes in the world, he was a sensible young fellow. O, there's not the slightest reason why you should not take the money."

"You must permit me to be the judge of that, Mr. Clote," said I coldly.

"I think there is one other person who ought to be

consulted, Fred," observed my aunt with significance. "You should remember, dear, that your future wife would have been an heiress—I don't say but for your fault, yet certainly but for *you*. It should surely be a question, whether you should deprive her a second time, from a morbid sense of independence, of competence and position."

"It is a question," said I, "which she shall answer for herself.—This deed, as I understand, Mr. Clote, puts me in possession of the sum you have mentioned?"

"Just so," said he: "you can read it for yourself."

I took the parchment and placed it in Nelly's hand. "If you think it right to keep it," said I, "we will do so, dear Nelly; you are quite free to choose."

"Good Heavens!" cried the little lawyer, jumping out of his chair; "if it had been *ad valorem*, there would have been a matter of a hundred pounds gone, in stamps alone!"

For Eleanor had snatched up her scissors and cut the precious document right across!

I had already cause to know that she was possessed of spirit and independence, but I had never admired my darling more than at the moment when I saw her with half that parchment in each of her hands.

"She has been accustomed to be a great deal in the open air herself," observed my aunt quietly, in answer to Mr. Clote's look of astonishment and alarm; and it was the only occasion on which I ever knew Aunt Ben to indulge in a touch of satire.

"It does not matter to *me*, of course," said the lawyer ruefully; "but you understand that all Mr. Cecil has done is now labour in vain."

"We quite understand that," said I; "and also that it was a labour of love. Pray, tell him that we thank

him with all our hearts. He has forbidden me to write to him, but I must send him a few lines upon such a matter as this."

I was by this time in the hall with Mr. Clote, who, I fancied, was not sorry to escape from the company of a young lady of such a very resolute character as Eleanor had proved herself to be. In this, however, I did him wrong.

"My dear sir," said he confidentially, "I couldn't tell you so before the ladies, but the fact is, I can tell Mr. Cecil nothing, for the simple reason that I don't know where he is. If I wish to have any communication with him in future, it is to be carried on through an opera-dancer. Yes, sir. Did you ever hear of such an unprofessional proceeding in your life?"

"An opera-dancer?" said I. "Do you mean Miss Brabant the actress?"

"Well, I believe that is the young lady's name. There is not much difference (as I have been given to understand) between actresses and opera-dancers. She lives at Laburnum something, in St. John's Wood. Upon my life, sir"—and here he mopped his forehead—"I feel as if I was being struck off the rolls."

I was not so shocked as Mr. Clote, but I was almost equally surprised; for singular as it was that, after what had passed between them (which was surely something of no pleasant kind), Cecil should have appointed Ruth to be the medium of correspondence between myself and him, it was yet more strange that he should have done the same in the case of his lawyer.

A new key to the mystery of Cecil's conduct now presented itself to my mind. Perhaps Mr. Clote was right in his conclusion, though he had arrived at it so easily. It was possible that my cousin was keeping his resolution

with respect to Ruth in the letter, but not in the spirit. He would not marry her, but he had found it impossible to live without her. A proposal of that kind might easily have produced the indignation and chagrin which I had beheld in Ruth, but she might have accepted it, nevertheless. It was by no means out of character with Cecil's old self that he should make atonement for such a course of conduct in the quixotic offer that he had made to myself. It would be impossible, under such circumstances, that he could continue to visit us, and hence his letter of final farewell.

On the other hand, there was Ruth's solemn statement, that they two were never to meet again, which certainly at the time had impressed me with its truth. Moreover, I had my doubts whether my cousin, with five thousand pounds, would have been welcome to the brilliant Miss Brabant, however acceptable he might have been with seven times that sum. And again, she must have been fully aware of his intention of making over his fortune, and have approved of it, since she had told me to expect a letter from him, with a request, to which, "however strange," she had besought me to accede.

Bewildered with these conflicting views, I determined, as far as possible, to resolve the question for myself; and, late as it was, I took a cab, and drove to Cecil's hotel.

"Mr. Wray had departed, with all his luggage, at two o'clock that day," was the reply to my inquiries; "and had left no address."

I then drove to Laburnum Villa. The house was dark, but for a single candle in an upper window. I rang the bell—first softly, then loudly, then with a peal fit to wake the dead. The little household, as I knew, kept very late hours; and I felt confident that the neglect of my summons was intentional. If it was, I should have

had no right to complain; for, after all, I was not "my cousin's keeper." But I did not think of propriety until I heard Fantine's step descending the stairs. Then I trembled a little, remembering the sharpness of her tongue; and, taking out half a sovereign, held it between my finger and thumb for a sop to Cerberus. It was not, however, Fantine at all, but a blear-eyed old woman, such as that comely damsel might have become some fifty years hence.

"Is Miss Brabant at home?" said I, taken greatly aback by this spectacle.

"No, she ain't," said the old lady, with a defiant air. "It's a pretty time for calling, this is; bringing honest people out of their beds. What do ye mean by it?"

I felt so terribly in the wrong, that I hastened to offer this good woman the coin which I had intended for Fantine.

"It's a farthing," said she sharply; then, having tested the gold between her toothless gums, she added, "No, it ain't," and scrutinised me admiringly by the light of the candle.

"I want to know how Miss Brabant is: she was very unwell this morning."

"She's as right as right," replied the old lady cheerfully: "gone into the country for a little change—that's all."

"Alone?" inquired I as carelessly as I could.

"Yes, yes," answered the ancient dame assuringly. "Besides, a handsome young gentleman like you ought to have no call to be jealous."

The leer with which she favoured me was full of significance. I daresay, from Fantine's eyes, it would have been that "roguish glance," which is asserted to be

so attractive; and indeed there was roguery still in this, and plenty of it.

"Any name?" said she.

I hesitated in doubt whether to leave my name or not.

"No," said I, "never mind;" and I turned upon my heel. "Good-night."

"He's tight," muttered the old woman like an echo. "He's forgot his own name;" and I think she was surprised to see me make such a straight course to the cab.

My expedition had been barren in results; but there was something in this last interview with that old hag which seemed to give me the conviction that I should henceforth be a stranger, not only to Cecil, but to Miss Brabant. It was my belief that they had gone off together.

I had never repented for a single moment of Nelly's act of decision with regard to the deed of gift; but I now approved of it more than ever. To accept money, even from a friend's hand, was, as Aunt Ben had said, distasteful to me, as it had been to all my race; but what would have weighed still more with me in rejecting Cecil's offer (even if it had been less unreasonably large) was the fact, that it had been made, as it seemed to me, with a studious avoidance of Nelly's name—nay with a sort of repudiation of her. Not a wish had been expressed for *her* happiness; not a single message of goodwill towards her was to be found throughout that letter of farewell; and though the same might be said with respect to Aunt Ben, I felt the neglect of my darling, of course, more keenly, and resented it with an indignation that my cousin's generosity towards myself inflamed rather than assuaged. And *now*, so far from accepting a fortune at Cecil's hands, I should have hesitated not a little at receiving a marriage present.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

On our Honeymoon.

WEEKS went on, and my feelings with regard to Cecil's conduct grew less intense, and likewise my curiosity to know its cause. It remained as great a mystery as ever; but I was content to let time resolve it. Miss Brabant had returned to the Corintheum, and was playing my *Foot-page* to still crowded houses. She evinced no desire to see me, and the drama remained as it was, without those finishing touches of which she had informed me it stood in need; but perhaps that had only been an excuse to compel me to bring Cecil to Laburnum Villa. He had not replied to the letter I had written declining his splendid gift, and I did my best to prevent my mind from dwelling on a subject that to me was as painful as it was perplexing. In this, circumstances assisted me. The success of my play had reversed the relations between myself and the managers. I found that they were not now so ceaselessly occupied but that they could acknowledge the receipt of a letter, and even write half-a-dozen for every one of mine. They vied with one another to secure my dramatic services, and I had quite as much work on my hands in that way as I could conscientiously perform. To do them justice, they did not exact from others a virtue to which they themselves were utter strangers, and thought the conscientiousness quite superfluous. What they desired was, not a good play, but *any* play by one who had already achieved popularity. I got three hundred pounds down —and the *down* is a very difficult thing to pluck out of a manager—for the *Pedlar's Pack;* which, therefore, realised, with the addition of what I had received for six

nights' representation from the manager of the Hole-in-Wall, a grand total of 301*l.* 10*s.* I found Mr. Magnus politeness, and Mr. Coryton punctuality itself; and both of them to be very agreeable scoundrels.

But besides having my hands full of professional engagements, a subject for still greater congratulation claimed my attention. The happy day of my marriage with Eleanor, so long delayed, was now drawing very near, and I could think of little else. If ever wedded happiness could be counted upon, it surely could be so in my case; for though we were both so young, I had known my darling all her life, and loved her throughout it—first as brother, and then as lover. I had long come to the end of her faults, but every day I seemed to find in her some new flower of virtue. There were few preparations to make, for we were to occupy the same house as man and wife as that in which we already resided; the only difference being, that Nelly was now to be its mistress in place of Aunt Ben, though, of course, she was to live with us still. I wrote to Cecil to inform him of the date of the ceremony, and besought him to be present at it; for my own fervent happiness had melted my heart towards him. But he neither wrote nor came. This grieved us all, but more upon his own account than ours. We could not restrain our thoughts, though even to one another we never whispered: "He is ashamed to come." He sent no marriage present; but, greatly to my embarrassment, a very beautiful one arrived from Miss Brabant.

"Of course you will send it back to her," said my aunt, looking very seriously at me over her spectacles. "I call it the height of impudence, and most infamously bad taste on the part of your cousin!"

"My dear aunt," said I, "we know nothing certain

to Ruth's discredit; and if we should chance to be doing her wrong by our suspicions, I should never forgive myself for putting such an insult upon her as you suggest. She has been exceedingly kind to me—"

"No doubt," interrupted my aunt dryly. "I can only say that if I were Eleanor"—And she cast a glance at that unfortunate young woman, which seemed to say: "Arise, white slave, or be for ever fallen! Assert yourself *now*, or be a spiritless and subjugated woman all your life."

"Permit me to finish my sentence, my dear aunt," said I; and it was the only occasion that I remember using sharpness to that excellent creature. "It is to Miss Brabant solely, I was about to remark, that I owe my present success, and all the brightness of my professional future. Whatever injurious thoughts you may entertain about her, I must beg that you do not give them utterance, at all events in my presence. If appearances seem against her, that is no reason why I, of all men, should take her misconduct for granted. While it remains in doubt, you should give her, in bare justice, the benefit of that doubt—at all events, *I* shall give it her. If the gift had been sent to Eleanor" (and that it had not been so, and also that no letter accompanied it, were certainly circumstances that seemed to justify my aunt's suspicions), "I should have insisted upon her acknowledging it, though I think she would have had the good taste and charity to do so of her own free will. As it has been sent to both of us, however, it is not necessary for her to write her own thanks, but I will convey them for her."

Nothing more was then said about the matter; but before the post went out that evening, Nelly slipped into my hands a little folded note.

"Don't tell dear Aunt Ben," she whispered; "but send that to Ruth with yours."

From that moment I felt more assured than ever that I was going to marry a sensible woman.

The wedding took place early in June; and leaving Aunt Ben in solitary state in Merton-square, we went to Switzerland for our honeymoon. This choice of locality was, as I believe, by no means influenced at the time by any association with Cecil. It is not likely that the recollection of the catastrophe to which he had been witness among those Alpine solitudes, should on such an occasion have attracted us towards them; yet no sooner did we find ourselves within the shadow of the snow-crowned hills, than it began to occupy my thoughts to an extraordinary degree. I do not wish to exaggerate the fact, but it is certain that, while she was alive, my poor cousin Jane had never excited half the interest in me that the remembrance of her awful fate awoke in the region of its occurrence. After all, and though I had been less kind to her than I could have wished to have been (or perhaps the reflection arose *because* of it), I was still her kin; and it was a grievous thought, and one that intruded on me like a nightmare, that somewhere in those wastes of snow and ice my own flesh and blood was lying, unburied, yet incorruptible. Of course I took good care to say no word of this to my bride; but the idea had taken such possession of my own imagination, that it began to affect my spirits, and I had already resolved to pass over into Italy, in order, as I hoped, to get rid of so morbid a sensation, when a circumstance took place which caused it to recur to me with greater force than ever.

We were just sitting down to breakfast one morning in the common room of the hotel at Brieg, when (of all

men to meet in such a region) who should walk in but Mr. Clote, attorney and gentleman-at-law!

Even on one's honeymoon, one is glad to meet an acquaintance when one is far from home, and we both welcomed the old gentleman heartily enough.

"Have you been tearing up any more valuable law documents lately, my dear madam?" inquired he of my wife; and Nelly retorted by asking him whether his mind had yet given signs of decadence from exposure to the fresh air of the mountains, and the exercise that Swiss travelling must needs have entailed upon him.

"Well, yes, my dear young lady," replied he frankly, "it *is* softening under the circumstances you have mentioned, combined with female influence; for the fact is, I am travelling about with a young lady.—No, sir," said he, turning round upon me sharply, as I lifted my eyebrows, "she is not my wife, as you imagine; I daresay you wish she were. We all know the fable of the fox that had lost his tail, and how you bridegrooms affect to hug your gilded chains; but the fact is, she's my niece, Minna—a most terrible plague to me, but the only possession that my poor brother Tom had to leave behind him, and I was his residuary legatee. She keeps house for me—very well, I'm bound to say, and let's me do just as I like."

"Then how was it she made you come to Switzerland, Mr. Clote?" asked my wife mischievously.

"A client of mine fell ill at Geneva, and sent for me to what he thought was his death-bed. Over-walked himself, I daresay, and lost his sleep through getting up to see the sun rise, as though the sun-*set* was not equally satisfactory. Well, I had to come, and as I could hardly leave Minna at home alone, I brought her with me. She loves climbing like a boy; but otherwise there is not

much fault to be found with her.—But here is Minna. Look at her boots!"

Miss Clote was a bright little blonde, with blue eyes twinkling with fun, and the wholesomest appearance generally; in her hand was an alpenstock, for she had already been climbing something; and on her little feet a pair of such very stout boots, that I did not wonder that her uncle had called our attention to them. It was easy to see that these two relatives, apparently so unsympathising and even antagonistic, were on the best of terms with one another.

"I know she tyrannises over me," explained the old gentleman, in apology for his abject submission to this fair enslaver; "but then, it is only for a little while. Unlike *you*, Mr. Fred, when I once put my foot on English soil, I am a free man again; *here*, I admit, I do indulge her a little. She is presently going to drag me up to the Æggischorn to visit—what is it, Minna?—O, the Märjelensee."

"Why, that is close to the Alitsch glacier, is it not?" said I.

"My *dear* sir," pleaded Mr. Clote, "how *should* I know? Ask Minna."

Minna said it was; protested that there was nothing so well worth seeing as that elevated lake (subsequently compared by Mr. Clote to a more familiar sheet of water, the pond at Hendon); and that the accommodation at the Æggischorn was perfect—"like a delightful picnic."

My wife and I both listened to her with interest, but with very different feelings. It seemed to me, caught as I was just escaping from this melancholy district—at the very outlet of it—and thus reminded of the spectral scene which haunted me, that my eyes were doomed to look

upon it as it really existed. If this were so, it was better to get it over at once, and in cheerful company.

When, therefore, Nelly said, "O, Fred, let us go with them!" without any recollection in her mind of the locality as being associated with poor Jane's catastrophe, I acceded to her request at once. I did not think it necessary to tell her why I did so; and acquiescence in a bridegroom being the most natural proceeding in the world, she suspected nothing.

On the first opportunity, however, which did not happen till evening—for the lawyer and my wife went up on horseback to the Æggischorn, while I and Minna the Indomitable walked—I told Mr. Clote that if it could be done without frightening the ladies, I should very much like to explore, on the morrow, the very spot where the accident to my cousin had occurred.

"That is all very well," said the lawyer; "but it can't be done without frightening *me*. To visit such a place as you describe, I should require not only to be roped to any number of guides, but to the hotel itself; and even so, I should prefer it to be a bigger one."

"We will, of course, take guides and ropes," said I; "but I am quite sure, from poor Cecil's description of the place, that we need run into no danger. That he saw all was done that could be done, I have no doubt; but still, I feel that it would be some sort of satisfaction to me to gaze on the very grave-mouth that received my cousin, and to convince myself with my own eyes that it is not possible to rescue her poor body from the sharp teeth of frost and snow."

Mr. Clote shuddered.

"It is a most pious wish of yours, Mr. Fred, no doubt; but I really see no sort of obligation—at all events, on *my* part—"

"I'm not so sure of that," interrupted I gravely. "You are poor Jane's trustee; it is your duty to take every reasonable means of convincing yourself of the fact of her demise. The body has never been discovered: how do you know she *is* dead? Suppose the crevasse were to be thoroughly explored, and the body not found at all!"

"Upon my life," said Mr. Clote, "that's quite a new view of the matter. I think there's something *in* that. Dear me! To be sure, I have got nobody's word for your poor cousin's death but that of a parcel of foreigners, and of her brother himself, and *he's an interested party*. He's got her four thousand pounds, you know. Of course, I would take his word on such a point, in preference to the combined evidence of the governors of the Bank of England; but it certainly would be more business-like to investigate the locality for myself. It is deuced slippery on a glacier—isn't it, though?"

I calmed the little lawyer's fears, and vigorously prodded the place where his conscience had proved tender, till he agreed to accompany me to the Alitsch glacier. I did not intend to tell the ladies of our project till next morning, when I hoped to induce them to stay at the hotel while we put it into execution. But I found, on retiring that night, that my wife knew all about the catastrophe—the chambermaid at the inn having been very communicative to her upon the matter—and that both she and Miss Clote had made up their minds to visit the place.

"To tell you the truth, Fred, though I had quite forgotten the names of the Alitsch glacier and the Märjelensee, I have scarcely ever had poor Jane's accident out of my mind since I have been in Switzerland, though I would not have told you so for the world, had not this

happened; and now that we are so near to the spot, I should as soon think of neglecting to visit it as of passing by the churchyard in which she lay buried. If the expedition is dangerous, then of course that is a different matter; and Minna and I should only be in the way."

It was arranged, then, that if the guides should give leave, the ladies were to accompany us to the scene of last year's disaster; and they did give leave. Scores of men, and a good many ladies, had already visited it, at the conclusion of last year's season; and, in fact, we were compelled to understand that the Alitsch crevasse had become a sort of sensational exhibition. This shocked me excessively, and Nelly as much as myself. If,

> "To us,
> The fools of habit, sweeter seems
> To rest beneath the clover sod
> That takes the sunshine and the rains,
> Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
> The chalice of the grapes of God,"

than to "lie fathom deep in brine, tossing with tangle and with shell"—how much more did we revolt against our lost one being buried in the thick-ribbed ice, and looked for, though unseen, by curious careless eyes, for year after year to come!

It was very early in the season, for Switzerland; no pilgrimage had as yet been made to the place since the autumn, and Nature, though so changeless in her general aspect, is very variable in such a region with respect to her lesser features; still we were positively assured that the fatal spot would be recognisable; and on the morrow, accompanied by guides, carrying an abundance of ropes and a scaling-ladder, we four set out for it accordingly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Out of the Crevasse.

As we were the only guests at the Æggischorn, we had plenty of assistance in addition to the guides we had brought from Brieg; but although every member of the local force had been familiar with the aspect of this fatal crevasse last year, they were now quite unable to find it —it was either so altered in its features as to be unrecognisable, or it had altogether disappeared. As the glacier was comparatively free from snow, however, we did not discontinue our researches; though it was evident to me, from what I remembered of Cecil's description of the catastrophe, that we were ranging wide of the spot where it had occurred.

"What is *that*, Fred, on the ice yonder?" inquired Nelly suddenly, pointing out some distant object which had attracted her sharp eyes.

Following the direction of her glance, I perceived something small and black lying by the side of a great yawn in the glacier.

"It is a man's cap," said I, regarding it through an opera-glass which I had with me. "How can it possibly have got there?"

"Easily enough," said one from the inn. "That is on the road to the Faulberg; and somebody must have dropped it last summer. No one, at all events, has passed that way this year; of that I am certain."

When we reached the spot, which was not approached without some difficulty, the appearance of the cap—once apparently a wide-awake, but now crushed out of all shape—certainly bore out the man's suggestion. Perhaps it had not suffered much more than a cap would do if

left out for a winter upon Helvellyn; but it was certainly a deplorable object. The silken roof, with the name of the maker, had been rotted out by the snow; but on the leathern lining there were some letters written, which, though faint, were not wholly obliterated. Some of the party thought them O. M., and some C. M.; but Mr. Clote presently pulled out a magnifying-glass—ordinarily used for the perusal of old deeds, but of late employed to convince his niece that even moderate elevations were insurmountable—and decided that the letters were C. W.

"Why, those are Cecil's initials!" cried I. "He may have lost his cap here in looking for his poor sister; and this, after all, may be the very crevasse we are in search of;" and thinking of what that gaping grave might contain, I gazed down into its cold blue depths with reverent awe.

"Nay, sir," said the same guide who had spoken before, "that cannot be; for I know we are a long way from the spot pointed out by the young gentleman, which was under those steep rocks yonder, as I told you. I was one of those who accompanied him in his first search, and he was very positive about the place."

"And yet," said another, "I do remember that, on that night when he woke us all up at the inn with the bad news, that he did say something about having lost his cap."

This was quite enough (notwithstanding all were agreed that we were far southward of the fatal spot) to make me insist upon the crevasse being examined. A belt was buckled round one of the chief guides, and, a rope being fixed to it, he was lowered down very gradually, and in accordance with his own directions. Presently he gave a signal to be drawn up, which, of course, was obeyed.

"It is no use, sir," said he, after a pull at my brandy-flask (for he was damp and cold). "I went down the crevasse after the poor young lady last year, and feel quite confident that this is not the same. To begin with, the other had no bottom, and was thrice the size."

"Have you reached the bottom of this one, then?" inquired I.

"Well—no, sir," said the man frankly. "I got to where the crevasse narrows a good deal; but it opens out, I see, below again down to forty feet or so."

The man had evidently a disinclination to pursue researches not only disagreeable in themselves, but which promised no result. As I looked wistfully round our little party, my eye lit upon a young porter, whose eager face—just like that of a small boy in class who knows his lesson, and sees the question coming down to him—seemed to say, "Try *me*."

"Will you go to the bottom of the crevasse, and satisfy us that there is nothing there?" said I.

This he at once agreed to do; and we lowered him as we had lowered the other man, though, of course, paying out more rope. We could see him, but very indistinctly; but the walls of ice gave back his voice to us quite clearly. Presently he uttered a violent ejaculation, and we began to draw him up with haste, thinking that he had met with some accident.

"No, no," cried he, in his rough patois, of which Miss Clote was our interpreter. "More rope. There is something lying here." In another minute, during which we kept an ominous silence, he added: "It is a dead man."

Imagine the effect of such a ghastly statement delivered by its unseen utterer from the depths of that icy vault! Exclamations of horror burst from every mouth;

but Nelly turned so deadly pale that I put my arm around her, thinking she was about to fall.

"There is no dead man there," said the guide who had already descended; "for we have had no one missing. The cold has touched Baudin's brain. It is not right to—"

"Pull up—stout and steady," here interrupted Baudin from below.

And we did so. The weight was much heavier than before.

"It is worse than anything you imagine," whispered Nelly in my ear. "O Fred, be firm, be calm! I know who it is that he is bringing with him."

"Nay, nay," said I comfortingly; "dreadful as may be the spectacle, it is not poor Jane, we may be sure."

"I know that," answered she, with a shudder. "But this is worse—ten thousand times worse. Be calm, be firm."

I really thought that my poor darling was for the moment frightened out of her wits. It would have been excusable enough had she been so. I should have sent both the ladies back to the hotel ere this, if we could have spared the men to accompany them; but we could scarcely discontinue such work as that we had in hand, even for such a purpose. I motioned to Mr. Clote to take my wife, and lead her, with Minna, a few paces off; but a fascination which I could not resist kept my own eyes fixed upon the crevasse. It was fortunate for brave young Baudin that there were plenty of hands at the rope beside my own; for the spectacle that was now presented fairly paralysed me. Along with Baudin, and side by side with him, was now emerging from the crevasse another form, another face—a face which, though it had suffered a sad change, was still as recognisable to

me as that of my bride herself; a face, the owner of which had once bid me not to fear, for that I should surely see it again—*the face of my cousin Cecil!*

My brain reeled as I looked down at him; but I could not disbelieve my own eyes. It was undoubtedly he who had thus kept Tryst in such a ghastly fashion. I did not utter a syllable; some instinct repressed the cry that rose to my lips, and dried my tears at their source. If he had raised up an ice-cold finger, in sign of silence, I could not have felt more bound to keep my lips sealed for his sake, though my reason could not tell me why. The idea that was uppermost in the medley of weird thoughts that crowded on my mind was, that he from whom I had parted a few weeks ago—almost in anger, certainly with but little of that ancient friendship which had once seemed so inviolable—had come hither to the spot where he had lost his sister, and sought death by her side. I did not comprehend what the men were saying, in hushed tones, about the length of time that the body must needs have been lying in that icy charnel-house. One said, "For years;" and one, "No, no; but through the winter." Evidently none of the Æggischorn people recognised it for their visitor of the preceding season, as they took it up among them and began to carry it towards the inn. Nelly and Minna had hidden their faces in a close embrace; but Mr. Clote was staring at me like one thunderstruck. I held my hand up and shook my head; and he understood me, and was silent. Nothing more was said at present that had reference to this dread discovery; for our guides perceived that the nerves of all the party were shaken by it, and applied themselves solely to smooth the difficulties of the way. As for poor Nelly, she had fallen into a sort of half-swoon, and walked like one in her sleep; so her we

carried. She recovered, however, before we reached the inn, which we found in great commotion. Fortunately, although the landlord observed something to us about the likeness of the corpse to the poor young lady who had lodged with him last year and perished near the same spot, he did not pursue the subject; and as we were supposed to be connected with the deceased, we were left quite to ourselves. It was a great relief to us all (even to Minna, though she had no such reasons for courting privacy as the rest of us) to find ourselves alone.

"Did I not tell you, Fred, that I knew whom we should find?" were Nelly's first disjointed, half-hysterical words.

"You did," said I. "But how, in Heaven's name, did you guess it was poor Cecil?"

"I knew it," continued she, "from the moment we found the cap with his initials in it. I bribed the porter to volunteer to descend the crevasse when the other man declined to do so. I would have gone down myself rather than have left him there. O, think of it, Fred, lying there all alone in the ice and snow of Alpine winter!" and she began to sob most pitifully.

"I don't understand all this," said Mr. Clote, looking from my wife to me. "I parted from my unhappy client certainly not two months ago; and you talk of his having lain in that dreadful place throughout the winter."

"Nelly is right, Mr. Clote," said I gravely, for I saw it all now. "This matter, as my wife whispered ere I saw his face, is far worse than we imagine. It is not only Death that we have to face, but Deceit and Fraud." Here I hesitated. "Your niece can be relied on, I am sure?"

Minna rose to go, with a deep blush; but her uncle laid his hand upon her shoulders. "The girl is true as

steel," said he. "If the honour of your whole family should be placed in her hands, believe me, it would be safe."

"I am about to place it there," said I solemnly. "If this body is that of my Cousin Cecil, Mr. Clote, where, think you, is Jane? You told me only yesterday that Cecil was benefited to the extent of four thousand pounds by his sister's death; how much would Jane have been benefited by that of Cecil?"

"Why, nothing—nothing at all; the estate would have then passed to you."

"Just so. By personating Cecil, however, Jane has contrived to secure his fortune and her own as well."

"Personating Cecil? You don't mean to tell me that my client—your cousin—whom I have had interviews with a dozen times, is a *woman?*—a chit of a girl in man's clothes. It is absolutely incredible, sir. No woman had ever such a head for business, to begin with."

"My Cousin Jane was always shrewd, Mr. Clote," said I, "and somewhat too shrewd. I will stake my life that the fraud I have described has been put upon us, though much indeed yet remains to be explained. What a return has that woman made for a brother's love!" Alas, thought I, if that poor cold breast lying yonder could feel a pang from human wrong-doing, how through and through would it be smitten now!

"A base return indeed," mused the old lawyer; "and with what guileful craft she has gone to work! It is certainly most fortunate that you fell in with me. You and your wife are interested parties, you see, but I can bear independent testimony with respect to identification. Not, however, that she'll venture to fight such a question for a moment. You'll not make it a criminal matter, I suppose, unless you think—"

"Of course not," interrupted I; "I should not dream of prosecuting Jane, for her poor brother's sake.—What is it you mean?" for there was a look in the lawyer's face significant of something amiss, worse even than what we already knew.

"You might do it *for* his sake. I mean, that it is just possible that there has been foul play in the matter —as to the way, I mean, in which your cousin came by his end."

My blood seemed to stand still in my veins as I listened to his words. "If I thought *that*," cried I with vehemence, "the law should have its way to the uttermost with her. I myself—"

"Hush, hush! for we do *not* think that," interrupted Nelly, rising, and laying her hand upon my arm. "If any one has cause to complain that Cousin Jane has been her enemy, *I* have; and it is I who say that she is innocent of any such charge. When Cecil (as I thought her to be) was striving to prevent my marriage all he could, and (as was pretended) for his sister's sake, I never doubted even then that sister and brother had loved one another dearly, and I do not doubt it now. Jane never loved but two persons on earth"—here Nelly glanced at me with tender significance—"but she loved them with all her heart, and one of them was Cecil."

"That may be as you say, my dear Mrs. Fred," said Mr. Clote thoughtfully; "but I look to the business aspect of the matter, while you regard it from a sentimental point of view. Now, to *my* eyes, that deed of gift to your husband of all Cecil's fortune, except a bare thousand pounds—which was probably retained for the very reason that if she had given all, it would have looked too *like* restitution—the execution of that deed, I say, seems to me to argue acute remorse."

"No, no, Mr. Clote," continued Nelly; "it was not that, though I cannot undertake to say what it was. It may have a suspicious look to you; to *me* it is simply inexplicable: and remember"—here she turned to me again—"that deed was not drawn up until our marriage-day was fixed. No; Jane never harmed her brother—I will stake my life, nay, more, dear Fred, your love, on that; but when he met his death yonder, so suddenly, a dreadful instinct must have seized her to take advantage of it. If you and I had not been engaged to one another, it is my belief Jane would never have done so; but she could not endure the thought that your inheritance of Cecil's wealth would enable you to marry *me*."

"It needs a woman to explain a woman's conduct, uncle dear," said Minna softly: "you may be sure that Mrs. Wray is right."

"But what are we to *do*?" ejaculated Mr. Clote. "You have no right to indulge in sentiment, you know—that is, to compound a felony—at the expense of the law of the land. You don't mean to say that you are going to let this sort of thing go on? This masquerading cousin of yours is not to be allowed to keep the property that has been entailed upon heirs-male, I suppose; you'll surely stop *that*."

"Let us sleep a night upon it, Mr. Clote," replied I, quoting a favourite maxim of the lawyer's own. "We are all of us far too much excited, and some too pained and distressed, to exercise any sober judgment on it just now."

For my part, indeed, I was scarcely master of myself; for while we were thus talking about Cecil's property, was not his own dear self, or rather the poor battered shell that had once held him, lying without, under a shed, stared at, perchance, by prying irreverent eyes, or tended

by unloving alien hands, at least. I did not venture to visit him, however, lest my emotions should betray me, until nightfall, when the superstitious fears of others made them glad enough to leave him to me alone.

I shall never forget that solemn interview—if a meeting between the dead and the living can so be termed. The moon was shining through the windowless shed, and fell full upon the rough coffin in which he had been already placed. The lid was not yet fastened down, and I took it off to look my last upon him. A change for the worse had come over it, even during the last few hours that the body had been exposed to the air; but I could still recognise the face that had always worn a smile for me, and never an angry look. On his finger was a poor ring I had given him when he had left Gatcombe; and I remembered, for the first time, how moved his sister had been when I asked her what had become of it. "You promised me," I had said, "that it should never leave your hand;" and she had made some lame excuse for having lost it. But Cecil had kept his promise —warm-hearted honest Cecil, who had been wronged so cruelly in the opinion of his friend, and well-nigh despised. I protest that I was more wroth with Jane upon that account—the injustice which her deception had caused us to do him—than at all else. To have thought him (of all men) avaricious, mean, morose, and he all the while lying lost and dead in his grave of ice—how his dumb face reproved me *now!*

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Coming Home.

WHEN I had bidden adieu to my poor friend for ever, and retired at last to my own chamber, it was not to sleep, but to think upon his fate, and to pass in review again and again the strange events that had succeeded it. My wife was as wakeful as myself, and full of the same thoughts, which she pursued with far more skill than I. Blame she had no cause to feel, as I had; nor was her sorrow, though great, so violent as to quench, as it were, with tears (as it did in my case) the fire of her indignation against Jane; or perhaps, as Minna had said, woman's wit is keener than man's to observe the actions and guess the motives of those of her own sex. She astounded me by declaring that an actual suspicion of the truth respecting Jane had flashed upon her on the night when I read the letter which announced (the supposed) Cecil's intention of never seeing us more. It was so like a woman's letter, she said, from first to last. It was true, she had dismissed the idea from her mind, next moment, as too monstrous to be entertained; but it had recurred again, in spite of herself, when Mr. Clote called with his news, and had certainly induced her to tear up the deed of gift—an act which I had myself thought out of keeping with Nelly's nature, which was quiet and undemonstrative, though firm and resolute. A hundred incidents occurred to us now, any one of which would have strengthened suspicion, had we once entertained it; but, of course (with the exception of those momentary instincts on Nelly's part, which I have just mentioned), we had entertained none.

Cecil's—that is, the supposed Cecil's—forgetfulness

of all that happened in the old Gatcombe days, except in so far as his sister had been mixed up with them; and in particular, his total obliviousness of the plays that we had been wont to write, I might almost say together, since much of them had been contributed by his own pen; his excusing himself from playing the flute—which, in reality, he could not play at all, but only the real Cecil—and, on the other hand, the improvement which we had all noticed in his touch on the piano. How easy it was now to explain his disinclination for going into society, since the more eyes were fixed upon him, the greater chance of course he ran of discovery; and especially his determined objection to meet Ruth. He had feared her eyes beyond all others, and would, without doubt, never have attended the performance of the *Foot-page* had he dreamed that she and Miss Brabant were the same person. More than all, and which ought to have excited in us something more than mere surprise, was that astounding circumstance of his not recognising Ruth, even when brought face to face with her. How feeble now appeared those arguments by which I had endeavoured to explain this fact away, both to myself and others; and how sagacious had Lady Repton shown herself in attaching such extreme importance to the occurrence! No wonder that my masquerading cousin had dreaded *her* sharp looks, and striven to propitiate her by all means in her power!

"You don't think, by the bye," said I, "that her ladyship herself had any suspicion of the truth, do you, Nelly?"

"No," returned my wife slowly, "I do not think she had; and yet, I believe, she was always on the very verge of discovering it. 'I can't understand this change in your Cousin Cecil,' she would say, half-a-dozen times a day. 'He is not himself at all, and he has certainly not

altered for the better.' But then, again, she was always ready to allow that his friendship for yourself was as warm and loyal as ever. In fact, Fred, your Cousin Jane would not have been able to carry on the imposition for a day, if she had not been in love with you, which enabled her with ease to simulate friendship, and still keep a residue of tenderness."

"Poor Jane!" sighed I.

"It will be time enough to pity her when she has owned her crime," observed my wife dryly.

Here there was a little pause.

"Aunt Ben had no suspicion of the matter, Nelly, think you?"

"None whatever. No one had any, to be called such."

"One person, however," said I, "has known the fact for these two months. Ruth, of course, discovered it on the day of their interview."

"She discovered it before, Fred. She knew it on the previous night, when we were at the theatre. I well recollect now that I saw Miss Brabant's face peering through the curtain, when you were acknowledging the plaudits of the audience, with a pained puzzled look upon it that I could not understand; it struck me as so strange—for I had forgotten the relation between them, and, indeed, everything else but your triumph—that she should be looking at your cousin, and not at you; and then do you remember the message that arrived immediately afterwards, asking you to come behind the scenes? If you had gone alone, this mystery would, I think, have been solved at once; but as Jane accompanied you, Ruth took her own way with her in the matter."

"And she has kept her own way ever since," mused I. "She must certainly have some very powerful reason for silence, since I am sure she would not voluntarily be

a party to any fraud on you and me, and, above all, to benefit Jane."

To that opinion my wife assented; but her wits could not help mine to any conclusion as to Ruth's motive. One thing, indeed, was tolerably plain, that she had been made, by some means or other, Jane's confidant, and could elucidate matters if she would. And yet I shrank from frankly disclosing the whole affair to Ruth, for fear that she might, after all, be herself deceived; it was very unlikely, but still in a case where so many improbabilities did exist, that one also might. On the other hand, I had no means of communicating with Jane except through her.

The best way of contriving this, of letting my cousin understand that the fraud was discovered, without at the same time disclosing it, should the letter fall into the hands of a third person ignorant of the fraud, occupied our thoughts for hours; but at last I hit upon a plan which at least had simplicity to recommend it, and if approved of by Mr. Clote, we decided to act upon it on the morrow. Convinced that we had now done our best in the way both of counsel and reflection, we contrived, though not until the little household of the inn was already astir, to snatch a little sleep.

The course I proposed to myself, and in which Mr. Clote concurred, was, that I should write to Jane at once, but not to Ruth. The note would, of course, pass through the latter's hands; and its Swiss postmark and the *Immediate* upon the cover, would, if she were in possession of the secret, convince her that it was discovered. At all events, it was probable that she would open the note, and finding that all was known, would take such means to inform Jane as might seem most judicious.

On the other hand, if Ruth was herself ignorant of the matter, and mere curiosity compelled her to open the

note, it was so worded as not to compromise Jane; and in such a case, the communication would, of course, be forwarded (for it was very certain now that Ruth and my cousin were not under the same roof), and must be left to have its own effect. It ran as follows:

COUSIN—(for I could not bring myself to write "Dear Cecil" now, with the protest of that poor dead face so fresh in my recollection),—I have tidings for you which must needs demand your attention: our lost one was found here in a crevasse of the Alitsch glacier last night, and is to be buried to-morrow. Mr. Clote is with us at this place, the Æggischorn, which you doubtless remember so vividly, and the identification of the body is established beyond doubt; but it will not be made public, unless you choose it to be so. The newspapers will doubtless speak of it as that of "an unknown tourist;" and so far as we are concerned, believe me, we should prefer it to be always so described. We shall be at home when this letter reaches you; so direct thither to your kinsman, FREDERICK WRAY.

The nails were being driven into my dear Cecil's coffin as I wrote this letter; and when I addressed it to "Cecil Wray," I felt as sharp a pain as though they had been aimed at my own heart; yet, curiously enough, my very love for him made me tender towards the sister he had held so dear, and when that letter had once passed beyond my power to do so, I would have given much to have recalled it.

For was it not but too likely that it might have some immediately fatal effect upon its unhappy recipient? I remembered now with a shudder that almost fatal day at his hotel—I still thought of it as "his" from habit—when

I had arrived only just in time to prevent him from committing a new and still more deadly crime than that of which he stood convicted; and how much more reason was there for his committing it *now!* I recalled his look of terror, too great, as it seemed to me, even then, to be ascribed to the propinquity of death, and found the right solution of it. He had not recognised my voice, changed by fear and excitement, when I cried "Cecil! Cecil!" at the door; and the sound had doubtless struck him as something supernatural—a cry of reproach from yonder icy tomb, or the voice of his own conscience appealing to a dead brother for pardon. The letter on his desk, about which he had been so solicitous as to whether I had read it or not, had doubtless been his confession, made, as he imagined, on the brink of eternity; and was there not far more reason for his crossing that brink *now* —for his escaping "anywhere, anywhere out of the world" wherein his fraud and falsehood had been exposed—than there had been *then!* To be sure he had passed his oath to me that he would never again attempt his life, but he had done so with that curious proviso, "unless I myself should approve his doing so"—suggested, doubtless, in view of possible detection; and might he not now easily convince himself that in my opinion, as in his own, the best thing that he could do in so sad a case was to end shame and life together!

This apprehension troubled me exceedingly, though I strove to keep it to myself, and haunted me more and more with every hour that brought us nearer home. My wife, and even Mr. Clote and Minna (who accompanied us), were anxious enough for the contents of that letter which we should doubtless find awaiting us in Merton-square; but, for my part, I scarcely looked for a letter at all, but only for ghastly tidings.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Who bribed Batty?

WE found Aunt Ben awaiting our return in a most excited state; for we had not liked to intrust to paper what had brought us home so suddenly, but had only written to say we were coming. We, on our part too, had an anxious question to put to her: Was there a letter from Cecil? But she replied carelessly that there was not, and rallied me about my devotion to my cousin, "which seemed to make Fred ignore his poor old aunt and everybody else."

I am sure the dear kind soul had no cause to say that; for the sight of her honest kindly face was welcome to us both—more at that time than ever, for its promise of sympathy in trouble. She listened to the story of our discovery at the Æggischorn with hushed amazement; not that surprise was too great for horror, but that, from the moment she understood what had happened, the mere details ceased to interest her, in comparison with her concern for the unhappy Jane.

"What *will* she do? What *can* she do?" ejaculated she. "Some one should go to her at once."

In this I quite concurred; and Aunt Ben volunteered to be the ambassador.

"I will go to Miss Brabant the first thing to-morrow morning," said I, "and procure the address."

"By the bye, there *is* a letter for you from Miss Brabant on the drawing-room mantelpiece."

I had flown downstairs and seized the letter before Aunt Ben had done explaining to Nelly that she had thought "it didn't signify, and might wait." It was but a little note indeed, written on pink paper, and just such

a communication, to look at, as might have "waited" (from my aunt's point of view) any amount of time without damage; but its contents were very pregnant.

DEAR MASTER FRED,—I opened the letter you addressed to Cecil, for which, under the circumstances, I had his authority. After much consideration, I have sent it on this afternoon. Heaven grant I have not done wrong. My mind misgives me. I must see you immediately upon your arrival. Do not lose a moment. If I am at the theatre, come and fetch me.—Yours truly,

RUTH.

It was then ten o'clock at night. I snatched up a newspaper, and, looking at the performance-list of the Corintheum, perceived Miss Brabant advertised for the burlesque as well as for the *Foot-page*. She would be at the theatre then for another hour; and thither I determined to go, that I might see her the first moment she was at liberty.

For once, even Aunt Ben did not disapprove of my eagerness for an interview with Ruth.

"I have done her wrong, I allow, Fred," said she; "at all events, with respect to your cousin."

Agitated as I was, I could scarcely help laughing at the unnecessary air of candour with which this apology was made.

"It is most creditable to you, Aunt Ben," said I, "to confess as much."

"I am always ready to own myself in the wrong when I *am* in the wrong," returned she gravely. "But you must admit that the case was most suspicious. We ought to be charitable; but it surely can scarcely be expected of us to credit a gentleman with being a lady."

The burlesque was drawing to its close as I entered the theatre; but I had hardly patience to await its conclusion. How thin and pointless fell its poor jests upon my ear, as I stood, concealed from the notice of those upon the stage, and watched its tinselled scenes and worthless glitter! The central figure was always the Fairy Queen (Miss Brabant), more beautiful than all the rest, and more unreal. Beneath the paint which she had freely given her cheeks, I thought I could discern the traces of anxiety and grief; and at times her grand eyes seemed to wander round the house, as though in search of some new-comer. But she played her part to perfection; and when at last the curtain fell, it was amid a tumult of applause. A born actress was Ruth, if ever there was one; for it was certainly not want of feeling that enabled her to throw aside the burden of such a secret as she carried in her breast, and assume so naturally a character that was to real life what a rainbow is to a sunbeam.

I came upon her ere she had reached her dressing-room, and while she was still bedizened in her robes of mimic state. They were rich and costly, however, as though they had belonged to veritable majesty; and I noticed that her fingers were covered with splendid rings.

"You are come at last!" were her first eager words. "I have been looking for you all the evening."—Then, turning to her "dresser:" "Bring me my cloak and hood, girl."

"But I can wait," said I.

"Yes; but I can *not*," interrupted she imperiously. "Every moment, for all that we can tell, is priceless."

"Do you apprehend, then, that he—that she—" My voice was tremulous, I know; for I dreaded to hear her corroborate my fears by her own.

"I apprehend the worst," answered she gravely.

The cloak and hood were brought, and rapidly adjusted, yet with such skill that they quenched the glories of her stage attire as completely as an extinguisher on flame.

A brougham was in waiting at the stage-door, which carried us quickly to Laburnum Villa.

"Don't talk to me upon the way," said she; "let me collect my thoughts; for I have much to tell you."

Fantine opened the door to us without betraying a scintillation of astonishment. She had the faculty of not being surprised at any event; or, if she did possess the curiosity peculiar to her sex, she had the resolution of a North-American Indian not to betray it. She lighted the chandelier in the little drawing-room, relieved her mistress of her cloak, and left us together, at midnight—Ruth a dazzling butterfly, and I a grub, travel-worn and travel-stained (for I had had no time even to change my clothes)—as unconcernedly as though I were making a morning call.

"I knew this interview must come to pass some day, Master Fred," began Ruth slowly, and speaking with painful effort; "I have been expecting it, looking forward to it with dread, for months, that appear years. It is hard for you; but it is far worse for me, as you will hear." Here she stopped, and laid her hand upon her heart, as though she could scarce draw breath.

To spare her, and help her out with a narration that gave such evident pain, I put a question.

"You knew her, did you not, from the moment that you first set eyes on her in Cecil's clothes?"

"I knew her while she stood by you in the box, Master Fred. I am too much used to dress in masculine attire myself to fail to detect such masquerading in others. But the recognition brought about another knowledge—

the corroboration of a suspicion much more terrible, much more strange, that had haunted me for years."

"What suspicion?" inquired I. "What knowledge *could* be more terrible or strange than that about which I am here to speak?"

"Ah, *you* have forgotten," said Ruth vehemently. "But I, who loved him, with all his faults, from his cradle even to that awful day when he and I were buried in one living grave; I, for whom he toiled, and to whom, for so many years, he was father and mother, and lover, and all; *I* had not forgotten my brother Richard."

"But how did the sight of Jane, disguised in man's attire, remind you of your poor brother?"

"Because I saw in her *his murderer!* Yes; it struck none of you wise gentlemen in Sandylandshire that Batty's story might, after all, be true; but it struck *me* from the very first. It *was* Cecil's gold that bribed the poor wretch to remove the poles, and it was Cecil's self that placed it in his hands—that is, this spurious Cecil; not my own. No, no; not he who risked his life to save my brother, and who did save *me*—O, would that he had let me die!—but this one."

Ruth was sobbing as an angry child sobs, partly with fury, partly with grief, and her eyes flashed fire through her tears.

"She did not wish to murder Richard, I know; she wanted to kill *me*, the village wench whose beauty had witched her brother. But since she could not find the chance to do it unless by slaying another victim also, my Richard was sacrificed. What mattered the life of a mere country clown like him, when weighed against my lady's prospects!—*Not capable of it?*" (This in reply to some feeble protest of my own, though, to say truth, I had no doubt that Ruth was right, and that the true ex-

planation of Batty's story had been found at last.) "You saw her face when she stood at our cottage-door—the first time that I ever met her brother—and yet you say not capable of it! Why, there was Murder in her eyes that very day!"

When I recalled that scene to mind, I could not deny it. I remembered Jane's outburst of contempt and fury; her patient submission under Cecil's passionate rebuke; and then her brooding silence on the journey home. It was not likely, being what she was, that she should ever forget that it was through Ruth that her brother's wrath (for the first time in their lives, as I believe) had been evoked against her; and then, as weeks went on, and Cecil's love for Ruth came to his sister's ears (as no doubt it did), was it likely, being what she was, that she should have borne it tamely, unless she had had some scheme within herself, like this, which was to have ended all at a single blow! I called to mind that hour upon the sand-cliff when I saw her coming from the pine-wood above Wayford, pale with rage; the fiendish plot that had been so long smouldering in her mind, doubtless just ripe for action; and, again, how she had kept her room from indisposition—the better, probably, to slip out unobserved in Cecil's clothes, and bribe the foolish lad; and then, again, how, as I had noticed when the news of the catastrophe came to us in the Hall, she alone of all the audience seemed neither surprised nor shocked, but only looked to see the effect of it on Cecil. She alone, too, had abstained on that occasion from coming to the sand-cliff: resolute and cruel as her nature had showed itself to be, she had not been equal to the task of watching by the pit-mouth while the bodies of her victims were being dragged out into the sunlight, that one, at least, was never to behold again. Her self-control had broken down, too, upon the night when the

constable brought word that the real murderer had been discovered in her unconscious instrument, Batty, though that, of course, had scarcely excited our surprise, much less suspicion. Read by the light of this startling discovery, in short, all the seeming inconsistencies in Jane's conduct were accounted for, and her motives explained.

"But how was it, Ruth, knowing what you did," inquired I, "that you yourself kept silence?"

"I *knew* nothing, Master Fred," returned she vehemently. "Is it not enough that my poor brother's dying words should ring in my ears, demanding justice even now, without your taunts to back them! I did *not* know; I scarcely even guessed. A black suspicion haunted me, as I have said, but that was all. I strove to think it baseless for Mr. Cecil's sake. You think I did not love him; and you used to think so. Ah me, I would I had loved him less, and justice more!"

"And yet, Ruth, when I went to wish you good-bye for him, as it seemed probable for ever—"

"It *was* for ever," interrupted she. "I knew *that*, whatever might happen. This Jane, I felt, would never suffer us to meet again; and hatred of her, and above all, this dread suspicion of her, overshadowed all my being, and chilled my love. But do not say I did not love him, when even now, when I know all for certain, my love is still so strong that, for his sake, I permit my brother's blood to cry out to me in vain, and her to live on unpunished! I told her so, in this room, to her face; and it was the bitterest drop in all the cup of her humiliation to know that she owed her life to the love I bore her brother!"

A look of triumph lit up Ruth's haggard features for an instant; but it passed away, and gave place to the same dejection as before.

"It matters not now, Master Fred—when nothing matters—but you have been very good to me, and such friends are very, very scarce with such as I, and I should like to keep your good opinion of me when I can. You are doubtless thinking that I ought not to have taken Cecil's money. But why not, since Jane had killed my bread-winner? True, I did not know it then for certain, but I guessed it. And if my guess was right, it would be some beginning of punishment to her to know that her brother had made provision for me, and was still bent on making me his wife. But I myself had lost that hope. While his sister lived, I could never have wedded him; nor, as I then thought, even had she died! I strove to shut him from my thoughts; I changed my name, and made my way in life unknown to all, till accident threw you and me together. Bereft of friends, and utterly forlorn—though always in a whirl of gaiety—the thought of seeing your kind honest face was very welcome to me; and when the opportunity offered itself of doing you some service in my profession, I could not but seize it. You will do me justice as to Cecil even then; I forbade you to let him know that you had discovered me; I declined to receive the letters that he had confided for me to your hands; I closed the door of my heart against him all I could. But when the news came of Jane's death, my love returned for him as with a torrent's rush, and forced the door. I strove to forget his sister, and to remember only him, and, alas for *me*, I succeeded! You avoided me, for some reason—probably because you perceived the hope that was springing up within me, and knew, from some conversation with your cousin, that it must needs be barren—but I determined, nevertheless, to see him; and I *should* have seen him, though not so soon, had you not brought him with you to the play,

What a moment was that when my eyes first lit upon your Cecil, and showed me Jane! I have told you what that single glance revealed to me; but I have not told you all. Not only did I recognise in your disguised cousin the murderer of my brother, but, as I hope for Heaven's mercy, I thought for the moment that she had murdered Cecil also! If, when you obeyed my summons, you had not brought her with you behind the scenes, I would have had her brought to me at all hazards: not for your sake even, dear Master Fred, nor for your wife's sake, would I have spared that woman, had she proved to be the thrice-dyed villain for whom I took her! For Cecil's sake, I was ready to let her go unpunished for the act, which, designed for my own destruction, slew my brother; and for Cecil's sake (had she turned out to be his murderer), I would have had her hanged, as sure as dawn will break to-day! Imagine what I felt, as I stood side by side with her—I in my page's dress, unrecognised by her, but she disguised from me in vain—and asked her to this house upon the morrow! Once standing face to face with one another, I knew that I should learn the truth; and the next day we stood so. You did not come and hear her tell it—the whole story of her fraud from first to last—but, take my word for it, she told it truly. Next to herself and *you*—yes, *you*, I say—she loved her brother, and never thought of harming him, nor profiting by any harm to him, until she saw him perish before her eyes. The account she wrote you of the catastrophe was a correct one, if you read 'Cecil' for 'Jane;' except that the crevasse down which her brother fell was not so deep as she described it to be. He was dead, of course, poor soul, and past all aid; but it was necessary for her purpose that the body should never be brought to light; so she pointed out *another* crevasse, which seemed to be

without bottom, as the scene of the calamity. I cannot say when she resolved to play this hateful part; I don't think she quite knows herself. Perhaps the idea first crossed her while she was still upon the glacier, and grew and grew with every minute of fruitless search, until she reached the inn, when the opportunity of changing her clothes for Cecil's, before her arrival was perceived, presented itself, and overcame her last lingering scruples: then it took final shape. I asked her motives: they were love for you, and hate of Eleanor. She could not bear to think that Cecil's money should enable you to wed your bride; and just as a good mother says of her tempted daughter; 'I would rather see her dead before my eyes, than that she should marry such a one;' so Jane said to herself: 'I will see the man I love defrauded of his rights, and I myself be his defrauder, rather than that he shall wed my rival.'"

"That is like enough, Ruth," said I thoughtfully. "But how came you to know it? What spell had you to work with, that could make my Cousin Jane so frank?"

"The shadow that the gallows cast before it," returned Ruth fiercely. "My first words to her let her know her life was in my hands. You should have seen her dark false face—so like to Cecil's, and yet so little like—when I cried: 'Murderess! you killed *my* brother; have you also killed your own?' I knew that she was guiltless before she spoke; no one could have refused credit to that look of passionate denial. Great Heaven! what fire abides in that heart of flint! As though she had been some guileless innocent accused of shame she scarcely knew by name, she scorched me with her scorn. '*She* kill her Cecil—she! *Her* precious Cecil!'—as though my love was dross, while hers was gold."

"But she expressed remorse and sorrow surely, penitence for her crime—I mean for that crime at Gatcombe?"

"I know not if she did or not. I did not speak of *that*—I could not trust myself to do so, but strove to put it from me altogether, since she was to go unpunished. I did but show her she was in my power, and then spoke of Cecil only, and her fraud."

"Then it was through *you*," said I, "that Jane bade us good-bye, and wanted to have made such amends to us as lay within her power?"

"Not wholly so," said Ruth. "Weeks ago, she told me, she had been on the point of putting an end to herself (as you would witness), and making restitution to you that way. She took no pleasure, so she said (and I believe her), in her ill-got wealth (though she strove at first to do so), and would have gladly parted with it to its proper owner, if she could have done so without suspicion. Even *that* she would have risked, she said (and I believe her), but for Cecil's sake. To have her crime discovered, would have been to blacken Cecil's name and memory."

"And it was that reflection which weighed with you, Ruth, also, and earned her pardon?"

"Pardon? No; she never earned it: it is not mine to give. I have not, or I had not, even pity for her. But it was for Cecil's sake I spared her, and for yours. I could not bring such public shame on you and Eleanor."

"Thanks, thanks!" said I, with fervour. "It would indeed have been hard to bear.—Where *is* this wretched woman?"

"At an hotel at Swanby, on the Sussex coast. That is, she *was*."

"We shall then be able to communicate with her at once?"

"She will be at that address, if she be alive."

"Do you think the tidings of our late discovery will kill her, then?"

Ruth shook her head. "No," said she gravely. "She will kill herself. I said just now, I had no pity for her, but I did feel pity while I spoke, and I feel it now—the pity that one feels, in any case, for those whom Death has carried before the Eternal Judge.—There is no hurry now"— for I had risen to my feet in horror at this confirmation of my fears. "It happened hours ago, if it did happen."

"Aunt Ben has offered to go down," said I. "But if anything so terrible is likely to have occurred, I should not like to let her do so alone."

"Go with her, Master Fred, is my advice."

"I will, and let us still hope for the best."

"Yes," sighed Ruth, as she shook hands, for I was in haste to be gone now, "for whatever *is* the best."

Her last words sank deep within me, for they reminded me again of Jane's proviso, that she would never again attempt her life unless I myself should make excuse for it, and if I did not make excuse for it, I should *now*, for certain, see no cause for wonder.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

At Last.

By the first train next morning, my aunt and I, and Eleanor—for my wife insisted on accompanying us, in hopes to be of some comfort to my wretched, forlorn cousin—went down to Swanby. It was a seaside place of growing repute, with a gigantic hotel, started by one Limited Company (all ruined), and purchased by another, to whom it paid ten per cent and a bonus—a palace in appearance, and for three months in the year, at least,

as full of tenants as a barrack. "There was no sitting-room at present disengaged," said the lady-manager, in answer to our inquiry; "but there would be one vacant for certain the next day. In the mean time we could use the ladies' coffee-room."

There was an air of embarrassment in the woman's reply, I noticed, but I set it down to some doubt in her own mind of whether the promised apartment would really be disengaged.

In the coffee-room, which was of immense size, it also struck me, as such trifles do strike one, no matter how the mind be occupied with serious matters, that the waiters hung about in groups, and whispered together to an extent which greatly interfered with the practice of their profession.

We ordered some refreshment, and whilst it was getting ready, I inquired of one of them, as carelessly as I could, whether a gentleman of the name of Wray was still stopping at the hotel.

"Mr. Wray, sir? Do you mean Mr. Cecil Wray? Are you any relative of *his*, sir?" asked the waiter mysteriously.

"Yes," said I. "Why do you ask? What is the matter? He is not ill, I hope?"

"No, sir, no," answered the man nervously. "I'll tell the head waiter, sir."

And before I could stop him, and inquire the meaning of his strange conduct, he had left the room to summon his chief. The head waiter was a portly man, with even a graver air than is customary with such important functionaries, and he moved like a monarch at his own coronation. Before he could get across the room to us, his progress was arrested by a fussy little gentleman at a neighbouring table.

"Waiter, *head* waiter," cried he, "what is all this I hear? No one will give me a direct answer, and I insist upon one."

The head waiter stopped, and stooped to whisper something, of which I could only catch the words, "quite unnecessary," and "not infectious;" and the fussy little man nodded his head a great many times, and looked appeased. Then the other resumed his stately progress.

"Were you asking for Mr. Cecil Wray, sir?"

"I was asking whether he was at the hotel," said I.

"Why, yes, sir, yes, he is," answered the man in a confidential tone. "Would you please to walk this way?" And he motioned towards the door.

"Well," said I, turning doubtfully towards the ladies, "perhaps it will be as well if I went first."

"You had better leave the ladies here," whispered the man behind his hand. So I accompanied him alone.

"If Mr. Wray is any friend of yours, sir, I'm afraid I have bad news for you," said he, as we left the room.

"He has not met with any accident, I trust?" said I, not knowing what to say, but on my guard not to appear to anticipate any catastrophe.

"No, sir, no. This is his sitting-room, No. 18;" and he stopped at the door so numbered, and produced a key.

"Is he here?" inquired I, unconsciously using the same sick-room whisper in which my companion spoke, and full of dire forebodings.

"No, sir. You can come in. They took him upstairs at once."

The room was empty, but showed signs of recent occupation; on the floor were strewed some fragments of letters torn into very small pieces, and on the table was the old desk I knew so well, but closed and locked.

"What has happened, man?" said I, in a fever of impatience. "Tell me the worst."

"Well, sir, your friend was taken ill this morning on a sudden—just after his letters had been carried in to him at breakfast—yes, sir, that's the truth. He's *dead;* and we've locked the room up, just as it is, in case there should need to be a crowner's 'quest.—Take a glass of water, sir."

From a carafe upon the sideboard he poured out some water in a tumbler that stood by it.

"One moment," said I, as I held it in my hand untasted. "I am Mr. Wray's cousin, and sole relative, and this news has been too much for me. Is the doctor who attended him in the house at present?"

"Yes, sir. I'll fetch him at once. Keep up your spirits, sir, *pray* do!"

I am sure the good man was apprehensive of a second catastrophe in No. 18, with such unwonted quickness did he start upon his errand.

No sooner was I left alone than I emptied the tumbler behind the grate, wiped it thoroughly with my handkerchief, and refilled it from the carafe. In the water I had thrown away I had at once detected the smell of prussic acid. I had hardly satisfied myself, by a hasty glance around the room, that there was no other object of suspicion, before the waiter reappeared, with a tall gentleman in black, whom he introduced as Dr. Fullam.

"A sad case this of your poor relative's," were his first words, when we were left alone together.

"A most distressing one, doctor," said I; "indeed, the news I have just heard has shocked me beyond measure."

"Very naturally, very reasonably. I have just been telling the proprietor of the hotel (who, of course, is

anxious that there should be no unnecessary to-do about this unfortunate matter) that I have no doubt in my own mind that it was the heart. Have you any cause for suspecting that your relative was suffering from any nervous depression? Could any news have arrived, think you," and he looked down at the scraps of paper, "likely to give him a sudden shock?"

"Yes," said I; "I think it extremely probable."

"Very good. That corroborates my view, you see. It is most important, for the proprietor's sake as well as your own, that no unnecessary stir, such as an inquest would infallibly make, should happen. I have no doubt about its being the heart."

I nodded, unwilling to trust myself to speak.

"Do you wish to see the body?"

"No," said I; "unless it is absolutely necessary for the sake of identification."

"You can satisfy me of that, sir, by word of mouth," said the doctor, sinking his voice to a whisper. "I said it was a sad case; let me now add that it is a very strange one. The name of Cecil is one common to both sexes. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," said I, with significance. "I am very far from wishing you to do anything contrary to the law, or your own conscience; but if you can manage matters so as to prevent idle talk, you would be conferring a great personal obligation."

"I will do my best, sir," said the doctor thoughtfully; "at all events, there need be no farther inquiry as to the cause of death. The proprietors are naturally desirous to avoid publicity."

Whether Dr. Fullam was himself a shareholder in the hotel company, or only physician in ordinary to the establishment, I never knew; but his services were of the

utmost value to us. I revealed to him the whole circumstances of the case, with the exception of what I had detected in the tumbler. They were corroborated, for his satisfaction, by the respectable Mr. Clote of Lincoln's Inn; and my poor cousin's burial was effected without public scandal.

To stop idle talk, however, was a much more difficult matter. The secret of the sex of the deceased had of necessity to be confided to other and less discreet persons than Dr. Fullam, and eventually it oozed out, and even became a topic for the newspapers.

Those portions of the story, however, which it was most important at that time to keep concealed, remained untold. They are told now, when their revelation can effect no harm, in such a manner as only to inform those very few whom they concern, not others. To the world at large, this "o'er true narrative" will have no personal application, and seem but a curious episode in human life, to be read and then forgotten.

To those three persons, however, whose names have been most frequently mentioned in this history, the mutual relation between Jane and her brother affords a topic of lasting interest.

Aunt Ben is disposed to think that the love that was certainly shared between them was very unequally distributed; that Jane's love for Cecil was never so great as his for her, and infinitely less than her love for herself. If she had really loved him (argues my aunt), and notwithstanding the devotion manifested by the great personal risk she ran in the commission of that awful crime at Gatcombe for his sake, it is quite impossible she could have behaved in such a shameful and irreverent manner towards him for his mere money after death.

My wife, on her part, acquits her of all sordid mo-

tives, and is of opinion, that though Jane loved her brother dearly, she loved somebody else even better; and that to that misplaced affection her fraudulent impersonation of Cecil was wholly due.

As for me, I strive to see in the character of my unhappy kinswoman an extreme example of that large class of persons who possess affections running fiercely (in her case, uncontrollably), but only in a few channels; never overflowing their narrow banks to fertilise a neighbour field, or even so much as to lay the dust upon the Common Road. Such persons may be good husbands, fathers, brothers, but must needs be bad citizens (in a social sense), and hardly deserve the name of fellow-men. They are so wholly devoid of human sympathy, that they have none even for those they love. They love in their own way, it is true, but imperiously, despotically, and without commiseration. What pity, then, can such persons be expected to show towards those who dare to interfere between them and the objects of their love? Very great personages, such as emperors and the like, have been known to sweep from the face of the earth those, otherwise innocent, who have ventured to cross them (for which they are rather applauded than otherwise by that great section of humanity who are always ready to kiss "the strong hand," even when it is dripping with blood), and such imperial instincts are sometimes found in those who, unhappily for themselves, do not chance to have been born in the purple. The difference between a monarch of inflexible will and "a determined ruffian" lies only in the fact, that the one has been brought up at a court, the other at a police court; and yet how very seldom is it that kings are taught that they have "cricks in their necks!"

I look on Cousin Jane as on a half-mad Czar Peter—

shrewd, unprincipled, egotistic, passionate, revengeful. In the eye of justice, she was, of course, but a common criminal, or, if you will, a criminal above the common, since her temptation was comparatively small. I have no sort of mitigation or apology to offer for her. "It is no excuse," as I allow to Nelly when we argue upon this matter, "to say that every individual who sacrifices the interests of another to his own, or makes them of no account in his own mind, because he chances to be wiser or richer, commits the same crime (except in degree) as Jane did when she bribed Batty to remove the props of safety from Richard Waller's pit. It is no excuse to say that every man who makes a spiteful or unjust will commits the same crime (except in degree) as Jane did when she fraudulently personated her dead brother. It is no excuse—"

"There is no excuse *at all*, dear Fred," says Nelly, interrupting me with tenderness; "but there is excuse for *you* for trying to find some palliation for her conduct. I sometimes think, if it had not been for *me*—if you could have returned poor Jane's affection for you from the first —that her heart might have opened like a flower to the sun, and her life been altogether different."

Aunt Ben shakes her gray head at this.

"Jane would have been Jane," says she, "under all circumstances. Let us remember, rather, for our consolation, how she became Jane. Neglect must have attended her from her birth—neglect of morals, of religion, and the absence of all home ties. Without mother, when a mother's care was so indispensable; and with a father who understood so little of a father's duties, is it surprising that the poor child grew up to be the woman she did? On the other hand, to be sure, dear Cecil, who had no better opportunities, was wholly different."

So here Aunt Ben's apology breaks down like the rest, and it is a relief to turn to the subject that has been suggested by it—the consideration of Cecil's case alone. Did he ever doubt his sister's love for him? Did he ever apprehend that she was capable of committing a crime for his sake, and out of the greatness of that love? We all agree in thinking he did not, and are glad to think so. As to his entertaining any suspicion of whose hand had bribed poor Batty, the first breath of it would, I verily believe, have slain him.

"As surely," assents Aunt Ben gravely, "as the knowledge that her fraud was discovered slew his unhappy sister. It was 'the heart,' of course, as the doctor said, but it was the shock that affected the heart."

To this opinion I profess adhesion; for why should I tell her, or my wife, what I did not tell the doctor, respecting my poor cousin's decease? I had never in my own mind the slightest doubt of how it happened, from the moment when I put that tumbler with its faint sickly perfume to my lips; but it was not till long afterwards, that opening that same old desk of Uncle Tom's, I found corroboration of the fact. In the place the sand-castor had been wont to occupy, was a screwed-down ink-bottle that never had held ink, but a more deadly liquid, the odour of which, though empty, it had not lost, and which I did not fail to recognise. How long had that fatal draught been secreted there for the occasion that was sure to come at last? With what feelings of remorse and agony must its owner have poured it out, and then replaced the screw, and locked the desk, to spare us, if it were possible, one shame the more! What unutterable dread must have possessed that guilty breast! But let us no longer contemplate such a spectacle of despair. She has been removed from the tribunal of human opinion,

and has been elsewhere condemned or pardoned. Those words of the world's great poet,

"Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all,"

which were most frequent in my dear father's mouth, seem to fall upon my ear once more in the tones I loved so well:

"Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all;
Close up her eyes and draw the curtain close."

If Jane had ever written a Confession intended for other eyes than her own (as I believe she had), she had destroyed it. Not a scrap of writing was discovered among her possessions, except some letters of my own to Cecil, and those that I had written to herself, in the belief that I was addressing her brother. Since Ruth had discovered her secret, she did not perhaps deem it necessary to reveal it in her own hand.

Naturally, we all felt indebted to Ruth, who had certainly done her best—in very difficult circumstances, and at the sacrifice of her own feelings—both for us and for Jane. Even Aunt Ben owned this, and offered no opposition when I expressed my hope that for the future Miss Brabant would be received with welcome at our house. When, therefore, I wrote to tell her of Jane's decease, I enclosed to her a letter from Eleanor, regretting the estrangement that had taken place between them since the old Gatcombe days, and begging as a favour (for she did not pretend to disguise that Ruth had cause for resentment) that their intimacy should be renewed. The reply to the appeal was not direct, but contained in a communication to myself, chiefly about poor Jane. "I thank your dear wife," it ran, "for holding out her pure hand to me so cordially. Do not let her imagine that it is her own fault that the offer of such friendship comes *too late.*"

To me these words had a very sad significance, and I almost feared to set them before Aunt Ben, lest she should express some triumph in the accuracy of her prudent foresight. "Did not I always tell you," &c. "Perhaps you will believe me another time." But in this I did that excellent soul a grievous wrong. She made no comment at the time, but the very next afternoon took Eleanor with her upon an errand which, although bootless, did her infinite credit.

A few months ago, when Ruth was still nourishing an honest love, it might have borne good fruit: to have had such women as Aunt Ben and Nelly about her *then*, would doubtless have been a priceless benefit; but now it was, as poor Ruth had said, "too late;" she had closed our door against her, as it were, with her own hands.

I know, though she has never owned it, that Aunt Ben blames her own past conduct in this matter severely, and her prejudices generally have in consequence received a shock, which renders them less solid and "four square" to the assaults of reason. To our loving hearts, there seems to us no room in her for other improvement. She continues to reside with us as of old, and though she unnaturally forsakes her own flesh and blood in the person of her nephew, and habitually takes Nelly's part against me in all domestic arguments, I am bound to say she is generally in the right. Another generation is springing up around us, whose affection for her bids fair to rival ours, and with whom she is "The Great Aunt Benita" (from the Zoological Gardens), "Big Ben," and other absurd synonyms, which show love unmixed with fear.

Not long after the event I have just described, Lady Repton became a widow: her lord's last words—which affected her to tears in the repetition of them—were: "I

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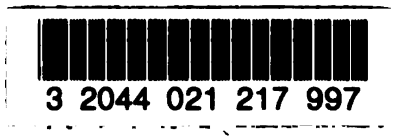
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